

Sermon for Sunday, October 28, 1979, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, MO 63105

"CAN A MAN BELIEVE IN JESUS"

St. John 10:22-44

Text: "Jesus answered them, 'I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name, they bear witness to me.'"

St. John 10:25

Two events have happened in the past several weeks that seemed unrelated at first. However, as I have pondered over both of them, it has become clear to me that they are, indeed, related. First, religious news articles carried the story of an event that happened in the Union Presbyterian Church in the Presbytery around Washington, DC. A minister had applied for admission to the Presbytery from the United Church of Christ. In the Presbyterian Church, when a minister comes from another denomination, it is customary to examine him on his religious beliefs. Someone asked him, "Do you believe that Jesus is God?" Without a moments hesitation he replied, "no". Now, in spite of this, the Presbytery voted to receive him into full fellowship as a Presbyterian minister.

It is not my purpose to castigate our sister denomination. However, in the past ten years, the Union Presbyterian Church has lost over 700,000 members. Why is this so? Well, surely a large part of the problem is a loss of confidence among the clergy as to who and what Jesus is--as to what he can and will do in the lives of people. If a church is not offering a real Lord who can truly change lives, is it any wonder that people drift off to something or someone who can offer them a life-changing Lord?

The second thing that happened occurred to me last weekend. As many of you know, I was in Austin, Texas participating in a conference. On Saturday night of that week I preached about Jesus and the power of His Spirit. I said that Jesus could take our hearts and change them. He could forgive our sins, he could put the Spirit in our hearts and give us new power. Then, feeling that I was led by the Holy Spirit, at the conclusion of the service I invited those who needed healing of any sort to come forward and I would pray for them. God's Spirit fell on us all and the people began to come forward, many of them in tears. One man had recurring migraine headaches and deep bitterness in his heart over something that had happened to him. I prayed for him and the next morning he told me what a change had occurred in his life. A young girl, the daughter of the Sunday school superintendent, wept and confessed she had been living with a lesbian and wanted to be free. Her father broke down in tears of gratitude and grabbed me in a bear hug. Person after person came and as we prayed you could already see changes occurring in people's lives. The next morning, Sunday, I preached at the eleven o'clock service. I preached on the parable of the ten virgins, five wise and five foolish. I told them that the Bible teaches us and Jesus tells us that he is coming again. He will come for each of us individually or he will someday come for all of us. "Are you ready for that?", I asked. I asked them if they were in a spiritual relationship to Jesus so that they were ready to step into the presence of God. As we began to sing the last hymn, God's Spirit again moved on my heart and I stopped the hymn. I said to them, "I feel very strongly in my heart that there are some of you here this morning who are not ready to meet God. You know that. But I feel that you want to take some kind of step, to take some kind of action, to say to God that you repent and that you open your heart and life to be controlled by the power of the living Jesus. We are going to finish singing the hymn. As we sing, if you want to make that kind of confession to God, and if you want to re-surrender your heart and life to him, I want you to come down and just shake my hand. You will be confessing Jesus before this congregation and you will be making a public commitment to surrender your heart again to the living Jesus." That was all I said and we started singing.

Just before the service, a young couple had met with the Session to join the church. They had been married only a few months and had just moved to Austin from Arizona. The wife was the first to come. She was dissolved in tears as she came. That was just the beginning. Person after person came to rededicate his or her life. And I suppose one of the greatest joys a minister can experience happened to me, for by brother-in-law and my sister-in-law came forward to recommit their hearts to Jesus.

Well, there are two things--a minister who says that he does not believe Jesus is the son of God, that he is not divine, and people responding to a living Lord and getting their lives changed. Now, either I am wrong about Jesus or that minister up in Washington is. Which of us is in error? Can a man believe in Jesus? That's exactly the question the Jews asked Jesus in our Scripture this morning. "How long will you keep us in suspense?" they asked, "If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." Jesus replied, "The works that I do in my Father's name, they bear witness of me." Can we trust--can we believe in--can we bet our lives on the works of Jesus?

Notice first his words. Jesus told us about God--of how he loves us and wants to forgive us. He taught us about how to live with one another in love. He said such things as, "In my fathers house are many mansions..." and that comforts us when we face death. He said such things as, "Come unto me all you that labor and are heavy laden..." and that comforts us when life has gone wrong and our hearts are heavy. He said, "Take no thought for the morrow..." and that gives us courage when we are afraid and anxious about life. When a woman was taken in sin, he spoke to her and said, "Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more..." and that gives us hope when we have failed and fallen short.

Yes, the words of Jesus. As the Bible puts it, "He spoke with authority." Once the Jewish leaders sent men to trap Jesus by the things that he said and when they returned, they reported, "Never man spake like this man." Well, I don't know about your problem or trouble or sorrow this morning. I don't know what your burden is or what failure mars your life. But I do know this: If you read the words of Jesus he will speak to your need. Sometimes people think the Bible is old fashioned and out-of-date. But the words of Jesus are as out-of-date as a heartache or a tear or a burden. They are as out-moded and dated as grief or tragedy or the need to be forgiven. Fashions and fads do indeed change, but the basic needs that you and I carry into life do not change. We never outgrow the need to be loved or understood, the need for acceptance and forgiveness. And the Bible says the words of Jesus are the same yesterday, today, and forever. Yes, you can believe in the unchanging words that speak to our unchanging needs. Jesus once said to his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" They said, "Well, some say this and some say that ". And Jesus said, "But who do you say I am?" And Peter speaking for them all replied, "Thou are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus said, "And flesh and blood did not reveal this to you". In our Scripture this morning he said to the Jews, "The Father and I are one" He said he was the Son of God and either he was who he said he was or a liar. There are those who deny the divinity of Christ and say he was just a man. He was a great man with great moral teachings; but will a moral teacher tell a lie about who he is and if he told such a lie, then his teachings cannot be trusted. Is Jesus trustworthy? His words say that he is.

Secondly, you can believe in Jesus because of his deeds. This was the case with Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, who came to Jesus one night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him." In the 4th chapter of St. Mark we are told how Jesus came to his disciples on the sea one stormy night and stilled the storm. The Bible says, "And they were filled with awe, and said to one another, 'who then

is this, that even wind and sea obey him?" Yes, who then is this--who then is this that opens blind eyes, makes the lame to walk and heals the sick?

Now, let me quickly confess that I do not understand the miracles nor can I explain them except to say that either they really happened or the writers of the Bible were incredible liars and built their own lives on a fantastic hoax. Personally, I can only conclude that he was truly the Son of God because of his mighty deeds.

Let me go on to confess that I believe in the miracles of Jesus for today. I know many people who have experienced genuine miracles in their lives. I know some of you who have been marvelously and instantaneously healed or loved ones made whole again. Yet, to me the greatest miracle of all is the ability of Jesus to change lives. What a miracle it is to know that God loves us and can change us. One of my seminary professors used to say, "The most incredible miracle of all is that God loves me. If I can believe that, any other miracle is of secondary importance." God can and sometimes does heal all manner of illness. But of far greater significance and far greater importance is the miracle that God heals broken lives, that he heals the separation between us and himself in Jesus.

Notice thirdly that you can believe in Jesus because of his death. Does that sound strange? Does it sound strange to say you can believe in a man because of his death? Yet, there is something strikingly different about the death of Jesus. Even the Roman soldier at the foot of the cross recognized it when he cried out, "Surely this man was the Son of God."

There is something about the death of Jesus that is extra-ordinary. I cannot fully nor adequately express it in words. I remember one Sunday night twenty-three years ago as a young minister standing up at evening service to read the scripture. It was such an incredible event that in my mind's eye I can see it now. I was reading the crucifixion story as St. Matthew tells it. As I began to read, a hush came over us all. It was as though the Spirit of God descended on that little church. It was as though God held us in the hollow of his hand as I read. When I finished the story of Jesus' death most of us had tears rolling down our cheeks. It was a rare and special time. When we read of what Jesus did for us, how he bore the agony and shame of the cross in our place, we can never be quite the same again.

One of our missionaries to Korea was examining a native woman who wished to join the church. She put her arm gently around the lady so that she would not be frightened by the questions and said, "Tell me a story about Jesus." With her face aglow the Korean woman began her simple story. She came to the Calvary scene and told it all until the moment when the nails were driven into his feet and hands. She began to sob and said, "I can't tell that part. It breaks my heart." Yes, it breaks my heart. As one poet has put it, "I know not how Calvary's cross A world from Sin could free: I only know its matchless love, Has brought God's love to me."

Jesus said, "And I, if I be lifted up, shall draw all men unto me." There is a magnetism about the crucified Jesus that does something to our hearts. Let me share with you the story by a famous Roman Catholic Bishop of France. Three university students of Paris were walking down a street one day when they passed a church where the people were going in to confession. The students, cynical and sarcastic, talked about this thing they called "superstition." As they drew abreast of the church, they suddenly dared one of the students to go into the church and tell the priest what they had been saying. Taking the dare, the student entered the church and confronted the priest. "Father," he said, "I have

come here merely to tell you that Christianity is a dying institution and that religion is a superstition." The priest looked at the young man keenly and said, "why did you come here to tell me this, my son?" The student explained the dare of his friends. The priest listened carefully and said to him, "You accepted the challenge of your friends and came here. Will you accept one from me? I dare you to walk up to the chancel where you will find a large wooden cross with the figure of Jesus crucified upon it. I want you to stand there before that cross and say these words, 'Jesus you died for me and I don't care a dam.'" To save face the student agreed. He went into the church and stood before the cross and said, "Jesus you died for me and I don't care a dam." He came swaggering back to the priest and said, "I have done it!" "Do it once more," said the priest, "for after all, it means nothing to you." The student went back and stood for a long time looking at the figure of Jesus nailed to the cross. At last he stammered out the words. To the priest he said, "I am going now. I have done it." "Once more," said the priest, "do you dare just once more?" A third time the young man stood before the cross of Jesus and looked at the suffering saviour. At last he bowed his head and fell to his knees. He came back to the priest and said, "Father, may I make my confession now?" And then the famous bishop, Canon R. E. Davies, concluded his story as he said to his congregation, "And my dear people, that young man was myself."

Yes, we can believe in Jesus because of his death. Somehow we know, you and I, that it was for us. As the hymn-writer put it, "Upon the cross of Jesus Mine eye at time can see The very dying form of One Who suffered there for me: And from my stricken heart with tears Two wonders I confess The wonders of redeeming love And my unworthiness."

Because of his Words, his deeds, his death, you can believe in Jesus. You see, he is the only one who can change your life--he is the only one who can heal a broken heart, share the load of your burden, lift the unhappiness from your soul. Yes, you can believe in Jesus.

What language shall I borrow
To thank Thee, dearest Friend,
For this Thy dying sorrow,
Thy pity without end?
O Make me Thine forever;
And should I fainting be,
Lord, let me never, never
Outlive my love to Thee.