

# The Last Temptation of Christ

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<i>Text</i>	Mark 15:29-32
<i>Readings</i>	Psalm 22, Mark 15:16-47
<i>Theme</i>	The mockery of Jesus on the cross is a final temptation to abandon his sacrificial death.
<i>Purpose</i>	To help us understand the temptation this mockery presented and his love that kept him on the cross to pay for our sin.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

This sermon has the title, “The Last Temptation of Christ”. Some of you will recognise that as the title of a controversial film directed by Martin Scorsese that was released in 1988. It was controversial because of its emphasis on the reality of Christ’s humanity and the temptations he faced while on the cross. It described those temptations from Satan in graphic pictures and vivid scenes.

It is understandable that it was so widely condemned, not because it emphasised the reality of his temptations and his humanity, but because it went so far beyond the gospel record in describing those. Anything that goes beyond the biblical record puts us on shaky ground.

Yet it is true that Satan tempted Jesus, and it is also true that these final scenes on the cross represented the last temptations of Christ as he was tempted by the mockery of those around him.

One of the worst things people can do is to laugh at you, to make fun of you, to mock you. We all hate that. No one likes to be ridiculed. If people laugh at you it makes you feel small and foolish. Sometimes, in response, you want to hide away, or leave the room, or crawl into a hole.

Or you want to prove them wrong; you want to say, “No, that’s not the way it is. Let me show you! Let me prove that I am right!”

This passage describes the final mocking of Jesus. The soldiers had already ridiculed him after Pilate had condemned him to die. Then they led him out to be crucified. It was nine in the morning.

There he hung, through the heat of the day until he died in the middle of the afternoon at 3 pm.

During those first few hours, until the darkness came at noon, many people came by and poked fun at him. These people came from three main groups.

First of all there were those who **passed by**.

Not all those who passed by mocked him. There were those near the cross who loved Jesus and who stood there by him and wept out of sadness and sorrow for what was happening. This included some of the women and John, the disciple who was closest to Jesus. They were grieved. All their hopes and expectations were pinned in Jesus, and now he had been flogged and was being crucified.

But many who were there that morning were indifferent about Jesus. There were people who specially came out to watch the crucifixion – the sticky beaks and the curious. And there were people who were passing by that place on their way out of the city. They had heard others talk about Jesus, or they themselves had heard him speak, or they knew someone who had seen him.

They are like many people today who know only a little about Jesus. They may have attended Sunday School for a short time, or attended a few Easter or Christmas services, or they read The Da Vinci Code, or they went to see the movie The Passion of Christ.

These people know a little about him and, as we say, “a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.” So too in this case.

Mark tells us that “Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, “So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!” (Verses 29-30).

They did not realise it but they were fulfilling the words of Psalm 22:7-8,

“All who see me mock me;  
They hurl insults, shaking their heads:  
‘He trusts in the Lord;  
let the Lord rescue him.  
Let him deliver him,  
since he delights in him.’”

They also showed their little knowledge by misquoting him. He had not said he would destroy the temple in Jerusalem but he had spoken of his body. Destroy this body of his and he would rebuild it in three days.

His prediction was being fulfilled then and there because they were destroying his body, and in three days time he would rise from the dead!

In their insults they urged him to come down from the cross and save himself. This was Satan’s last ditch attempt to prevent Jesus from dying on the cross for the sins of his people.

Right from the start Satan had been trying to draw Jesus away from this path of suffering and sacrifice.

He did this when he tempted Jesus in the wilderness and urged him to turn stones into bread to satisfy his hunger. That was a temptation to use his power for his own gain, for his own advantage. If Jesus had given in to that temptation it would have made him more likely to give in at this crucial time on the cross.

Satan also presented this temptation to Jesus through Peter when his disciple urged him not to follow the path of suffering.

And he faced this temptation again in the Garden of Gethsemane.

And here he faced it again. "Come down from the cross and save yourself! Think about yourself. Consider your own needs. You don't have to do this you know. You could use your almighty power and get yourself out of this situation. You have done enough, now come down from there."

But Jesus remained where he was. He did that because he knew that he had to die to pay the price for sin. He had to die to take our punishment on himself. If he saved himself then he would not have saved us who believe in him. So he ignored that mockery and continued his suffering. He rejected that temptation and continued on to his death.

He did that for you who believe in him.

"Bearing shame and scoffing rude,  
In my place condemned he stood,  
Sealed my pardon with his blood,  
Hallelujah, What a Saviour!"

The second group of people who mocked Jesus was **the chief priests and the teachers of the law.**

They "mocked him among themselves". They talked about him with disdain in their voices, but close enough and loud enough for him to overhear.

The tragedy is that these were the very people who should have understood who Jesus was. They had the Scriptures, they knew the prophecies, they administered the sacrifices, they taught the law. They of all people should have understood and believed, but their hearts were hard and their minds were darkened.

They realised that Jesus claimed to be the Christ, the Messiah, the King of Israel, the Son of David, but they did not accept his claim.

The parallel today is found in theologians who know a lot about the Bible, and lecture in theological colleges, and preach in large cathedrals, but who do not believe what the Bible teaches about Jesus. They do not believe that he was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary.

They do not believe that he died a sacrificial death. They don't believe in his physical resurrection or his second coming. People like Professor Lloyd Geering and Bishop John Spong are the modern day equivalents of the people who mocked Jesus.

"He saved others", they said, "but he can't save himself."

Yes, Jesus had saved others. He had given sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, mobility to the lame, life to the dead, forgiveness to sinners. He had saved others.

And he could have saved himself. He could have applied that same power to his own situation. He could have called on his angels to come and destroy the Roman soldiers, to sweep away these mockers and to take him down from the cross!

But he chose not to. He remained there for your sake so that you might be saved, if you believe in him.

"What thou, my Lord, hast suffered  
Was all for sinners gain;  
Mine, mine was the transgression,  
but thine the deadly pain.  
Lo, here I fall my Saviour,  
Tis I deserve thy place;  
Look on me with thy favour,  
vouchsafe to me thy grace."

They continued their mockery among themselves saying, "Let this Christ...come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe." (32)

These priests and teachers of the law had seen a number of the miracles of Jesus.

They had seen Jesus give sight to a man born blind and they could not dispute that miracle because they had his evidence and that of his parents. (John 9).

They had heard about the raising of Lazarus from the dead and had even plotted to have him killed because people were believing in Jesus because of this miracle.

They had seen miracles like these and had refused to believe.

Even if Jesus had come down from the cross and they had seen that with their very own eyes, they would still have refused to believe.

Jesus only had one more miracle to give them and that was his own resurrection from the dead. That was the last sign he would show them, the sign of the prophet Jonah who was three days and three nights in the belly of the fish. So Jesus would be three days in the tomb and then would be raised.

Even then most would not believe. Jesus himself knew that. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) he had said; "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

Yet, thankfully, after his resurrection many did listen to Moses and the prophets through the preaching and teaching of the apostles, and they did believe in Jesus. Even some of the priests became obedient to the faith – even some of them believed in him.

What about you? Do you believe? Do you trust in Jesus? When you "survey the wondrous cross, on which the Prince of Glory died" do you, in response, pour contempt on all your pride? Do you humble yourself and put your trust in him and his saving death for you?

The third group who mocked Jesus were **those crucified with him**; they "also heaped insults on him".

These two were not just petty thieves. They were more like Barabbas who had been imprisoned because of insurrection against the Romans. They may have belonged to that violent radical group known as the Zealots.

They despised Jesus.

They wanted to get rid of the Romans by the sword, but Jesus was a man of peace.

They bitterly opposed Caesar, but Jesus taught that they should render to Caesar what was Caesar's. He was not the king they wanted.

So they mocked him for his approach. They scorned his kingdom of peace and his kingship. They ridiculed his ideas of humility and service. He did not represent the things they were fighting for.

Their equivalent today can be found in terrorist groups around the world: a variety of Islamic organisations, suicide bombers, right and left wing extremists in various countries; all of these have chosen the way of violence rather than peace, of revenge rather than forgiveness.

No one is interested in a king whose reign is spiritual and who rules in people's hearts and mind; instead they want a kingdom that is physical and material.

No one wants a kingdom that is not of this world; rather they want one here and now!

All of these people reject Jesus and the kingdom he came to establish. They did not understand who he is or what he came to do or the nature of his kingdom. They too heaped insults on him.

However, later on one of these two men who hung next to Jesus believed.

Mark tells us that both were mocking him. But Luke, in his gospel, tells us that later one of them defended him. Perhaps he changed his mind when he saw how Jesus bore his suffering and when he heard his words from the cross.

So later on he rebuked the other and declared him an innocent man and asked Jesus, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

His mockery changed to faith.

His ridicule changed to belief.

His scorn changed to respect.

He understood something of the kingdom of Jesus.

He believed that there was a purpose in the suffering and death of Jesus Christ.

What about you?

What do you believe about Jesus?

How do you see him?

Who is he to you?

Do you see him as a fool to be mocked and ridiculed and scorned?

Or do you regard him as the Son of God to be accepted, believed and received?

This mockery around the cross represented the last temptation of Christ. Satan made one final attempt to have Jesus abandon this path of suffering.

One final attempt to have him give up on his intention to die for the sins of his people.

But Jesus held firm to his course.

He did what he had come to do.

He obeyed the will of his Father.

He died for the sin of his people.

He died for all who believe.

"Lifted up was he to die,  
'It is finished', was his cry,  
Now in heaven exalted high,  
Hallelujah, What a Saviour!"

Amen.