Book 6

Sunday November 7, 1976

"WHAT IF JESUS CHRIST HAD BEEN A CANDIDATE FOR PRESIDENT?"
Matthew 5:43-48, 6:1

In the presidential campaign just concluded this past Tuesday, religion was often mentioned. Both major party candidates claimed to be Christians, followers of Jesus Christ and readers of the Bible. This is not surprising since more than a majority of people in our country claim to be Christians, even though the term "Christian means different things to different persons.

However to be a Christian for any one of us, means among other things, that we are willing to listen to the teachings and the judgments of Jesus Christ. In order to hear what Jesus Christ has to say to us about our elections and issues and what goes on in our various levels of government and in our lives, let's imagine this morning what it would've been like if Jesus Christ had been a candidate for President of the United States.

Knowing Jesus as we do from the New Testament stories about him, we can be sure that he would not have carried on the usual campaign. In fact, during the months preceding the election we find him spending his time quietly with the outcasts of society, the sinners, the losers--so much so that people begin to wonder if he really is a serious candidate, just as the people of his time wondered if he was the Messiah. After all, he didn't act like they thought a serious candidate for the Messiah should act.

This morning as we look in on the campaign, we notice there are crowds following him, just as crowds followed him when he was on earth before. In the crowd are those who keep asking him questions about his beliefs and about the issues of the time. It is not unlike a press conference. Let's listen in. . . . .

QUESTION: Are you surprised that there are crowds following you and giving you their support?

ANSWER: No, I've had that experience before.

QUESTION: Will you be surprised if the people turn against you?

ANSWER: No, I've also had that happen to me before.

QUESTION: I understand you were invited to a Congressional Prayer Breakfast last week. You arrived late, but you were asked to say a few words. Can you tell us what you said?

ANSWER: I said among other things that my Father and I have little stomach for such events. Early in the morning we hear your prayers. They inform us of your desire to please us. Then you climb the hill and vote against our poor. I also reminded those present of what my Father said centuries ago through the prophet Amos. You can read it in the Old Testament. "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. . .but let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an overflowing stream." As you can imagine they didn't like my words very much.

QUESTION: If you are elected President, will you re-establish worship in the East Room of the White House?

ANSWER: Beware of practicing your piety before men and women in order to be seen by them. I said that long ago. It's in the Bible. You could look it up.

QUESTION: What is your platform?

ANSWER: You've had my platform for almost 2000 years. It's set forth in a well-known set of writings called the Gospels. But maybe people have forgotten what's written in them. I said such things as "Let the children come to me, do not hinder them, for to such belongs the Kingdom of God."

QUESTION: Why did you decide to come to the United States now and be a candidate for President?

ANSWER: I was intrigued by the celebration of your Bicentennial. While no nation has a favored status by my Father and me, we have always looked kindly on your country. We've even noticed that you have "In God We Trust," on your money and that in the pledge of allegiance to your flag

you say you are one nation under God. Actually, for 200 years your politicians and preachers have been reminding us that you are a nation under God. We cannot even escape such prayers when we look in on a televised professional football' game. You use the right words all right, but we sometimes wonder if you know what you are saying and the implications of it. For example, as recently as 1970, I heard your former President say, "I know America, and the American heart is good." I thought you should have a chance to show it.

QUESTION: Do you think Americans will respond to the principles of your ethical system?

ANSWER: I really don't have a system of ethical principles. I left you with a set of active verbs: "repent" "believe" "heal" "forgive" "Love. I announced that God's Kingdom was coming. I've always asked people who claim to follow me to love everyone, including their enemies. That ought to keep this nation busy for awhile as well as the churches who call themselves Christian.

More than anything else the Gospels are full of my announcement of the coming of God's Kingdom. The Gospels are full of calls to change your ways, as a nation and as individuals.

I'm also aware that there have been many bizarre best sellers that tell exactly what I would do if I returned to earth and some of these books purport to tell exactly when I'm going to return. Each author has me saying exactly what he or she wants me to say. But it is your idea that your nation should be measured by my teachings. You say that often enough. So for a few months or years, I'll play the game your way. So let me ask you, "How are you doing at feeding the hungry, visiting those in prison, letting the children come to me? How are you doing at peacemaking, and with loving your enemies?"

QUESTION: Is this your second coming?

ANSWER: No, the second coming is still waiting for some first-class repentances.

QUESTION: What is your stand on abortion?

ANSWER: I am of course "pro-life." However, I wish the pro-life people I hear so much about were also pro-life. We are happy to see how many of them are concerned about the life of fetuses. But we wonder why many of them did not speak up for life when you were bombing real, live, innocent babies in Cambodia? We wonder, my Father and me, why many of them are not concerned about children who are hungry and children who need to be in day-care centers? We wonder why they are not pro-life on the issue of capital punishment.

QUESTION: What is your stand on the use of drugs?

ANSWER: I have a continuing concern for the health and wholeness of all human beings and anything that is harmful to the body or the spirit should not be used by human beings and that of course includes such things as tobacco and junk foods.

QUESTION: What is your stand on amnesty?

ANSWER: My platform is quite clear on that in the Bible. On almost every page there is something about forgiveness and being reconciled to your brothers and sisters.

QUESTION: You've probably heard a lot about the religious revival going on in this country. Newsweek magazine even had a cover story about it several weeks ago and your name was prominently mentioned. Are you at least pleased with that? Everyone is talking about you.

ANSWER: Remember my words in the Gospels: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the Kingdom of God, but he or she who does the will of my Father in heaven." I've also said over and over again, "By your fruits you will know them," by what people do.

QUESTION: Don't you like anything you've seen in our country?

ANSWER: Oh yes, I'm not hard to please, except when I use the drastic standards of the Kingdom of God

for measurement. I especially enjoy the faith of children and like it when churches open their doors to them. I've also seen some adults who are not grim and despairing. I've looked in on a couple of good parties. I've seen some acts of grace in homes for the aged and heard a good choir or two. Some simple people say wonderful prayers and then share their bread with those who have less. I even heard of an offended woman who forgave her husband.

QUESTION: What's your position on National defense?

ANSWER: It's all a matter of comparison. For example, I understand that the value of all church buildings in your country is about $80 billion dollars. I also understand that this is about what your defense budget is for one year. I'm constantly amazed at how easily and willingly you are able to get money for weapons of destruction. Few people question that kind of expenditure. I guess my ENEMY, not the candidates of the other parties, but THE ENEMY, need have no fear about your getting your priorities confused. He and I both know that most of your funds will go into weapons for destruction. But remember my words of long ago, "Where your treasure is there is your heart also."

QUESTION: I understand that recently some men in the anti-pornography movement brought their large collections of hard-core material to you and asked you to condemn these materials. What did you say?

ANSWER: I repeated what you have already read in the Gospel of Matthew: "Everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away."

QUESTION: If elected, would you promote an absolutely free market and permit unlimited accumulation of private property untrammeled by regulation or other concerns?

ANSWER: Again, remember what I said earlier. It's in your Bible. "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures

> in heaven on earth where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth or rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. . . and if you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor and come follow me."

(end of questions and answers)

The questions from the crowd were over. And even though the event had been covered live by all the major networks, and the newspapers printed stories quoting the questions and answers, no angry letters came in. No one was against Jesus Christ. He could say anything without provoking a negative response. The common people heard him gladly.

Newspaper columnists and others who were used to being able to pin labels on candidates had trouble. He sounded conservative half the time and super-liberal or even radical the rest of the time.

Jesus said things that ought to have provoked the opposition of the people who sponsor prayer breakfasts, the clergy, pro and anti-abortionists, drug users, enemies of amnesty, the military and defense establishments, socialists and capitalists. No one could even determine if Jesus was Roman Catholic or Protestant or much less what brand of Protestant. Of course he was Jewish.

Someone was overheard to say, "My God, if he keeps taking those positions, they'll crucify him."

FOOTNOTE: Credit for the idea for this sermon goes to Martin E. Marty, professor of the history of Christianity at the University of Chicago and Associate Editor of the Christian Century. Mr. Marty wrote an article for the New York Times Sunday Magazine entitled "THE BEST MAN" published July 4, 1976, and in this article he speculated on what might have happened had Jesus Christ been a candidate for President. Thus some of the material also used in the sermon comes from the article by Mr. Marty.