

5 November 2006

"Rivers of Living Water"

Reading: John 7: 37-52

Just what should we expect to happen when we come to God? Is Christianity essentially cerebral or is it experiential? Should you *know it in your head* or *feel it in your heart*? And how supernatural should we expect our religion to be? Well, I am going to argue this morning that a real encounter with the living God should involve every part of our personality. Our minds and our hearts and our wills are affected.

Any serious study of the New Testament leads us to this inescapable conclusion. And the passage we are considering this morning makes it abundantly clear. To my mind, John 7 is one of the most informative and inspiring chapters in the Bible. So come with me to the temple in Jerusalem and to the Feast of Tabernacles.

The Feast

The view of Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives is impressive to this day. The sight in Jesus' day would have been even more impressive. The temple dominated the skyline. The sanctuary itself was imposing and the enclosed outer court occupied an area equivalent to several adjoining football fields.

It was always busy, but on feast days it was a hive of activity. This would have been true of all the feasts, but none more so than "the Feast of Tabernacles". Even today this feast is quite an event. It commenced on the fifteenth day of the seventh month and lasted seven days.¹ During this time the Jews were to live in booths to remember how God protected the Israelites and provided for them when they came out of Egypt. It was very much a harvest festival as it coincided with the gathering of the final harvests of the year in Israel. This feast provides the setting for one of the most significant statements that Jesus ever made.

¹ Leviticus 23:33-43. That is, according to the Jewish lunar calendar.

Opinions about Jesus

There was always excitement at the feast, but on this occasion an additional element added to the atmosphere. The entire crowd was abuzz with discussion about the young Rabbi from Nazareth. There were stories about his miracles and his teachings. Some, no doubt, had heard him and seen some of the miracles. Speculation was rife. Who exactly was he? Would he make an appearance at the feast?

At first there was no sign of him. He had deliberately delayed his arrival. But, according to John, he was the theme of many a conversation. The religious establishment was asking, "Where is that man?" This was towards the end of his ministry and there was already an informal plan to eliminate him. Apparently it was his custom to attend the Feast. They were expecting him, but he had purposely delayed his departure from Galilee.

Among the crowds there was widespread whispering about him. Some said, "He is a good man." Others replied, "No, he deceives the people." But the rank and file were afraid to speak openly about him for fear of the authorities.

Then, halfway through the feast, Jesus arrived, went in to the temple courts and began to teach. He would have been teaching in the outer court. It was customary for such teaching to take place under the impressive colonnade around the periphery of the outer court. His sudden arrival added a dimension to the discussion. Things began to hot up.

The authorities asked, "How did this man get such learning without having studied?" Obviously there was some controversy about his teaching. In response, Jesus insisted that those who chose to do God's will would know that his teaching came from God. He then asked pointedly why they were disobeying Moses' law by trying to kill him. Some people in the crowd said to him, "You are demon-possessed. Who is trying to kill you?" Others were asking, "Isn't this the man they are trying to kill? Here he is, speaking publicly, and they are not saying a word to him. Have the authorities really concluded that he is the Christ? But we know where this man is from: when Christ comes, no one will know where he is from."

Matters became even tenser. The authorities tried to seize him but no one managed to lay a hand on him because his time had not yet come. But many in the crowd put their faith in him. Some were saying, "When Christ comes, will he do more miraculous signs than this man? Because of all the whispering, the Pharisees sent the temple guards to arrest him.

You can sense that the atmosphere was charged. The authorities were furious as they looked on from a distance and attempted to find a way to have him apprehended without causing too much of a commotion; some people were whispering about him; others were speaking more openly; temple guards were on the lookout, awaiting an opportunity to arrest him.

The Last and Greatest Day

It is possible that Jesus deliberately kept a low profile for the remainder of the Feast. He knew that they were out to get him and he was careful not to precipitate a crisis too early. (cf. John 7:1; 11:54)

Then the big moment arrived. It was the last and greatest day of the feast. Let me tell you of an important ceremony that took place on each of the seven days of the Feast.²

All the priests were on duty; that's at least 446 with a corresponding number of Levites to assist them.

The best way to appreciate what was going on is to join the throng of worshippers. They would leave their booths at daybreak and head for the temple. They were in festal attire. In their right hand they were carrying a lulav, which consisted of three small branches tied together - a palm branch, a willow branch and a myrtle branch. In their left hand was an ethrog - a member of the citrus family, a little like a lime. Once they reached the

² There is some debate as to whether this refers to the seventh day or to the eighth. The feast itself lasted seven days but there was a special Sabbath on the eighth which had come to be seen as part of the feast. In some ways the seventh was climactic and the procedure on the eighth differed from that on each of the first seven days. All things considered, I think that the reference is to the feast proper and therefore to the seventh day. One way or another, the incidence of the water ceremony at the feast would have been the occasion for Jesus' utterance.

temple, they divided into three bands. About a third remained at the temple. A third went to a place called Moza, just south of Jerusalem, to collect more willow branches and a third followed the High Priest³ down to the Pool of Siloam which was not too far from the temple.

The priest carried a golden pitcher which held about one and a half litres of water. He filled the container and led the procession back to the temple. They would enter the temple area through the water gate⁴ to a three-fold blast on the trumpet. The priest would then mount the altar at the west. As he did so, the people would shout, "Raise your hand!" Some years before, one of the priests had poured the water out before he reached the altar, probably to make a 'theological' point. This was perceived to be an act of sacrilege and the people pelted him with their ethrogs. Some even lost their lives in the ensuing commotion.

Once he had mounted the altar, the priest would pour the water down the funnel at its corner. The participants knew what was symbolised by the water. They looked back to the way in which God had provided water in the wilderness. More importantly, they looked forward to the time when of Messiah when God would pour out his Spirit. The symbolism is powerful. Isaiah had prophesied,

I will pour water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground. I will pour my Spirit on your offspring and my blessings on your descendants. (Is. 44:3)

Later he said, "Come all you who are thirsty; come to the waters." (Is. 55:1) In Ezekiel 47 and in Zechariah 14 we are given a glorious picture of a river of water flowing from beneath the temple and transforming the land.

Immediately the Levites led the people in reciting the Great Hallel. (Psalm 113-118) The Levites recited the first line to the accompaniment of the flute and the people responded antiphonally. From then on the Levites recited the verses and, after each verse, the people responded, "Hallelujah!"

³ Or one of the priests substituting for him.

⁴ The Water Gate derived its name from this ceremony.

When they reached Psalm 118, the people joined in the recitation of the first, the 25th and last verses. The first and last verses read,

Give thanks to the LORD for he is good; his love endures forever. (First and last verses)

It is significant that the entire assembly was also required to recite the 25th verse.

LORD save us; O LORD grant us success.

This petition was preceded by the words:

The stone which the builders rejected has become the capstone; the LORD has done this and it is marvellous in our eyes. This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

We only have to see how this verse is cited in the New Testament to appreciate its appropriateness in this setting. (Ps 118:22-24; cf. Is 8:14; 28:16; Mt 21:42; Acts 11:14; Rom 9:33; Eph 2: 19-22; 1 Peter 2:6-8)

The people then waved their lulavs. The ceremony had reached its climax. There was then be a brief pause as they prepared to offer sacrifices. The religion of Israel was lively and at times noisy. And this ceremony was exuberant and expressive. After all the noise and jubilation there would probably have been a brief pause just before the morning sacrifice.

The Standing Invitation

It was probably during that pregnant pause that a voice rang out:

"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink - whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water shall flow from within him."

John tells us that Jesus stood to make that declaration. Rabbis usually sat when they taught but standing was more appropriate given the nature of the pronouncement. He also tells us that he raised his voice - literally "cried out". No doubt the crowd would have turned and the attention of the entire assembly would have been upon him.

If ever there was a Messianic claim, this was it! Jesus presented himself as the fulfilment of the hope to which the water ceremony pointed and he claimed that he was the one who could dispense the living water associated with the coming of God's kingdom. It immediately gave rise to a further discussion among the people. Some said, "Surely this man is the Prophet." Others said, "He is the Christ." Still others said, "How can the Christ come from Galilee? Does not the Scripture say that the Christ will come from David's family and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived?"⁵

Understanding the setting certainly helps us to understand the significance of Jesus' invitation. But the comment by John gives us further insight into it's relevance for us today!

By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given since Jesus had not yet been glorified.

Jesus' invitation actually combines two vivid pictures.⁶ **The first is of a tired and thirsty traveler in a hot climate.** Few, if any of us, know what it means to be really thirsty. We have liquid in abundance. Water is readily available. When people in Israel spoke about thirst, they were usually thinking of the kind of thirst that they experienced on a long journey. The sun beats down upon the traveler. His mouth is dry, his lips are parched and his water supply has run out. His face is flushed and his whole body is dehydrated. He pants for water. Nothing in life seems more urgent. This is

⁵ Notice John's deliberate use of irony here. Nowhere in his Gospel does he actually say Jesus was born in Bethlehem but this fact would have been generally known by time he wrote. In addition to the oral tradition, the nativity accounts of Matthew and Luke make it clear that Jesus *of Nazareth* had actually been born in Bethlehem. John assumes that his readers know this and records the discussion of those who were unaware of his actual birthplace.

⁶ Here I am indebted to John Stott for his excellent summation. John Stott, *Baptism and Fullness* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press), 53

the picture of a person without Christ in his life. He searches for satisfaction, for peace, for meaning and reality but, in the final analysis, nothing slakes his thirst. When Jesus said, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink," he was describing the satisfaction that only he can bring.

Perhaps there is someone in that position this morning. We are able nowadays to keep ourselves amused. We can fill our calendars and buy our toys and may imagine that we have brought some measure of relief to that thirst. But there is a thirst that temporal water cannot slake.

Boris Becker won Wimbledon when only seventeen. I remember sitting stunned as this audacious teenager beat my compatriot, Kevin Curren, in the Men's Final. Becker was brilliant. He was the youngest player ever to win Wimbledon, and he did it in style. The world was at his feet. I was surprised to read that he later came close to taking his own life. Here's what he said:

I had won Wimbledon twice before, once as the youngest player. I was rich. I had all the material possessions I needed: money, cars, women, everything . . . I know that this is a cliché. It's the old song of the movie and pop stars who commit suicide. They have everything and yet they are so unhappy. . . . I had no inner peace. I was a puppet on a string.⁷

Blaise Pascal, the great mathematician and physicist, made a similar discovery. The man who had done so much to understand the scientific value of vacuums commented significantly: "There is a God-shaped vacuum in every heart which only God can fill."

No, it is not true that those without Christ are desperately unhappy and unfulfilled. You don't feel this vacuum all the time. Achievement, sensual pleasure, enjoyment of the arts and meaningful relationships can bring a large measure of satisfaction. But there are those moments when the music stops and the friends have gone, the achievements seem futile and the

⁷ Quoted by Alister McGrath, *Bridge-Building* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 20

pleasure subsides. Then you become aware of the gnawing emptiness, the insatiable thirst. Then you know there is something missing.

It is then that Jesus says to you: "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water I give him will never thirst." And the invitation is to each and every one of us: "If *anyone* is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. *Whoever* believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." (4:13-14; 7:37-38)

The second picture is of a thirsty land. The hot sun has baked the ground hard. The river beds are dry. The trees and shrubs have shriveled. The animals groan because there is no pasture. *It is the picture of secular society without God.*

But here's what happens in the lives of those who have come to him. The drinking water not only satisfies our thirst; it becomes flowing water. The "spring of water welling up to eternal life" becomes a river. "We can drink only small gulps, but as we keep coming drinking, believing, so by the mighty operation of the Holy Spirit within us, our little sips are multiplied into a mighty confluence of flowing streams: 'rivers of living water' will flow from within us."⁸

As Archbishop William Temple wrote: "No one can possess (or rather be indwelt by) the Spirit of God and keep that Spirit to himself. Where the Spirit is, he flows forth; if there is no flowing forth, he is not there."

And this is for everybody. It is not the super deluxe version of Christianity for a spiritual elite. That's the whole point. This is normal. It was normal then and it is normal now.

Jesus was painting a picture that superseded the picture of Ezekiel 47. Ezekiel was given a vision of an enlarged temple. He noticed that water was flowing from beneath its threshold. He stepped into the stream. He walked 450 metres and found that the water was ankle deep. After another 450 metres the water was knee deep. Another 450 metres and the water was up

⁸ Stott, 54

to the waist. By the time he had walked another 450 metres the stream had become a river which no one could cross. He then saw a great number of trees on the banks of the river. He noticed that it flowed right into the Dead Sea and that wherever it did so, it turned the slimy, salt water into fresh water. Where the river flowed everything lived. On either side of the river were fruit trees that bore fruit every month. Even the leaves of the trees provided healing. (Cf. Zech. 14:8)

John's comment leaves us in no doubt: "By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified". But we live subsequent to the Day of Pentecost; we now live in the age of the Holy Spirit. The offer still stands. It is open to anyone who has *not yet tasted* and seen that the Lord is good. The good news is that if you place your faith in Jesus, God will forgive your sin. But that's not all. On the Day of Pentecost Peter declared, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off - for all whom the Lord your God will call." (Acts 2:38-39) And there has never been a retraction!

I need to make one last comment about the statement. This was never intended to be a 'one-off' experience. We cannot read too much into Jesus use of the present tense here. He was, of course, addressing those around him at the time. But John's explanation makes it clear that Jesus was referring to what would soon take place when he bestowed the gift of the Spirit upon his followers. And we know that the gift of the Spirit is just the beginning of a Spirit-energized life. By his Spirit, Jesus continues to meet our deepest need and to quench our spiritual thirst. Whenever you feel thirsty, you may come and you may drink.

What better way to conclude than to read (and heed) the last invitation in the Bible: "The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take of the free gift of the water of life." (Rev. 22:17)