

JOURNEY WITH JESUS.

B. THE AMBASSADOR.

16. The Water of Life.

John 7:1-10. Jesus and his disciples were back in Galilee as the time for the Feast of Tabernacles drew near. This, with Passover and Pentecost, was the third festival which all Jewish males living within 32 kilometres of Jerusalem were legally bound to attend: this trilogy of festivals was of great importance in the Jewish calendar but of even more significance to Christians who can see its fulfilment in Christ.

Passover – Spring. Unblemished lamb slain, blood
Exodus sprinkled on door, Israelites saved
12:1-14 from angel of death in Egypt.

Jesus, the Lamb of God, died at Passover: his blood saves us from eternal death through faith in him. 1 Corinthians 5:7.

Pentecost - Fifty days after Passover.
Offering of firstfruits of wheat sown in
Israelite fields—
Lev. 23:15-21

At Pentecost the Holy Spirit came down on the believers and the Church was born - the firstfruits of the harvest sown by Christ's death and resurrection. Acts chap. 2

Feast of Tabernacles – Autumn.
Thank offerings for all crops and grapes
gathered in.
Lev. 23:33-38.

The ingathering of all believers at the Last Day. Christ comes to take his Bride to be with him forever in Heaven
1 Thessalonians 4:13-17

Of these 3 festivals the Feast of Tabernacles was the most joyous, and devout Jews delighted in attending Jerusalem to celebrate it, even if they lived beyond the 32-kilometre limit. **Deuteronomy 16:13-15** sets out the required procedure: the feast was to last for 7 days after the produce of threshing floor and winepress had been gathered in. “Be joyful at your Feast,” instructs the Lord, “you, your families, servants, Levites, aliens, fatherless and widows.” Each person must bring a gift to the place of worship as a thank-offering, and celebrations must be shared with servants, strangers, and anyone who could not afford their own. “For the Lord your God will bless you in all your harvest and in all the work of your hands, and your joy will be complete.”

As a reminder of how the Lord cared for the young nation as it journeyed through the wilderness, each family had to construct a temporary shelter, or “booth,” of branches and palm fronds, enough to protect from the weather but not enough to shut out the sun: the roof had to be thatched but not too closely to shut out the stars. As it was early October and still autumn, the weather was likely to be fairly kind to them. It was a time of holiday and for the children, living for a week in their own special cubby-house (which they no doubt had helped to make) it must have been Christmas! I am sure their Heavenly Father rejoiced in their gleeful play. During the festival booths sprang up everywhere – on the flat roofs of houses, in the streets, in the city squares, in the gardens, and even in the courts of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Is it a chore or a joy to worship God? “Joy” is one of the words we see again and again in the laws God gave to His people Israel: the scheduled ceremonies at the Temple were also times of feasting and music where relationships were strengthened and enthusiasm renewed. There is a description in Deuteronomy 14 that rings with fun and laughter. Bring a tenth of your produce to the Temple and eat in in the presence of the Lord, or if your journey would be too long for that, sell the stuff and bring the money instead and buy “whatever you like” of meat and drink, eat it there, and rejoice. And share your stuff with the Levites (who had no inheritance of their own), the fatherless and the widows – that the Lord may bless you in all the work of your hands. A good time was meant to be had by all.

John 7:1-13. Jesus, for whom a visit to his Father's House must have always brought great joy, must surely have been looking forward to this pilgrimage but apparently made no effort to take the journey as he spent some time with his family. His brothers, mystified by his unaccustomed seclusion, taunted him that if he wanted to get some publicity for himself he should go to where the action was, in Jerusalem. Jesus calmly told them that they should go on ahead; they were in tune with the world and so were in no danger from the authorities. Jesus on the other hand was hated by the authorities for his outspoken judgements: he was in mortal danger and must choose his time carefully in order to be a messenger a little longer before becoming a victim. Already in Jerusalem people were watching out for him, some whispering that they thought he was a good man while others argued that he was deceiving the people. Whatever they believed, the crowds were all afraid of the religious leaders.

Once his brothers had departed, Jesus set out himself but as a private traveller, not as a pilgrim to draw unwelcome attention to himself. His disciples went with him, no doubt hoping that he would do something spectacular and declare himself as the Messiah while at the festival. **Luke 9:51-56** tells of their journey south from Galilee, passing through Samaria. They must have been getting impatient for the institution of the kingdom Jesus was always talking about: they were quite sure this kingdom would be the answer to Israel's problems and were eager to ascertain their pecking order within the system. John indeed seemed over-eager to establish the rights of this kingdom: he had already reported to Jesus that they had seen a man casting out demons in the name of Jesus, and they had tried to stop him because he was not one of their company. For this John earned not praise but a rebuke as Jesus told him sternly that no-one speaking in his name should be discouraged, because his heart was obviously in the right place.

How many churches seem to think they alone hold the truth? How many church-goers think their personal beliefs are the only valid ones? Are we scandalized by the methods some other denominations use? Do we label someone's idiosyncratic ministry as heretical? John Wesley spoke cuttingly of "that miserable bigotry which makes many so unready to believe that there is any work of God but among themselves."¹ Surely Jesus has shown us that sincere love for God is what counts in our service for him.

*"For the love of God is broader
Than the measure of man's mind,
And the heart of the eternal
Is most wonderfully kind."²*

Luke mentions that Jesus "resolutely set out for Jerusalem", knowing the dangers but trusting himself to his Father's perfect timing. Even travelling through Samaria had its risks: the Samaritans worshipped God on Mount Gerizim and did all they could to hinder and even injure those Jews who were on their self-righteous pilgrimage to Jerusalem. But Jesus, who had a habit of doing the unusual, took the way through Samaria in order to extend a hand of friendship to people who were enemies of the Jews. As evening came he even sent messengers ahead of him, seeking hospitality in the village they were approaching. But once the people there found out the little party was en route to Jerusalem the shutters went down with a bang. Filled with indignation James and John hotly asked Jesus permission to call down fire from heaven to destroy the whole village. So much for Jesus' former rebuke! Sternly he said, "You just don't get it, do you? The Son of Man didn't come to destroy men's lives but to save them. Come on, let's try another village."

John 7:14-31. It was halfway through the festival by the time Jesus arrived in Jerusalem and the crowds had grown in number: Jesus began to teach in the temple courts to a packed house. The Jews were amazed at the depth of his knowledge – he who had never studied at any theological school. Jesus' response was to declare his teaching was not his own, but God's, as anyone could discover for themselves if they truly wanted to do God's will. He accused them of not keeping the law of Moses,

in that they were trying to kill him off. The crowd then called him demon-possessed at such an idea, though others later said in surprise at his boldness, “Isn’t this the man they are trying to kill?” Once more Jesus declared that he had come from God, whereupon the mob tried to seize him to stifle his “blasphemy” but, under the protecting hand of his Father, “no one laid a hand on him, because his time had not yet come.” And even in the midst of the turmoil, many in the crowd put their faith in him on the basis that “when the Christ comes, will he do more miraculous signs than this man?”

John 7:32-52. Of course it didn’t take long for the Pharisees to find out what was going on: they conferred with the chief priests and sent the temple guards to arrest Jesus. Still Jesus continued preaching.

Each morning at this festival a priest would take a golden pitcher, draw 1 litre of water out of the Siloam spring (Jerusalem’s water supply) and carry it back through the Water Gate while the people recited Isaiah 12:3, “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.” With great ceremony the water was poured on the altar as a thank offering to God while the Levites sang and played their flutes and the people marched around the altar, joyfully waving the palm fronds and willow branches they had brought to the Temple and shouting enthusiastically at the singing of the words “O give thanks to the Lord.”

On the last day this thanksgiving ceremony was doubly impressive as they marched around the altar 7 times, and it was “on the last and greatest day of the Feast” (**verse 37**) that Jesus, fearless in spite of his would-be captors, stood and said in a loud voice, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.” It was an echo of what God had said to Israel in **Isaiah 55:1,2**, “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! ... Why spend money on what is not bread? ... Listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.” It was as if Jesus was saying, “You are glorifying God for the water that quenches your human thirst: come to me for the water that will quench the thirst of your souls.” And the temple guards were listening.

Jesus went on to say that the living water he would give would be rising up like a spring within the human soul. He was using this metaphor for the never-failing work of the Holy Spirit, the gift from God to all who believed in His Son Jesus Christ. Some were convinced now that Jesus was the Christ but others argued that the Christ would come from Bethlehem and that Jesus was from Galilee – why didn’t they just ask where he had been born? – and some even wanted to do away with him. It was another echo, from another prophecy – **Jeremiah 2:13** – “My people have committed two sins: they have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.”

Finally (**verse 45**) the temple guards went back to the chief priests and Pharisees without Jesus. They were used to hearing all sorts of arguments and discussions at the temple, for the temple courts were a favourite meeting place, and probably by now they were quite cynical at some of the outlandish propositions some would-be teachers put forth. So when their leaders asked indignantly where was the prisoner, they could only say, “No one ever spoke the way this man does.” This called down on their heads anger and scorn as the Pharisees accused them of being fooled along with the mob cursed through their ignorance of the law. It is to their everlasting shame that these superior religious leaders should despise the hapless folk they were meant to be instructing in the ways of the Lord.

In all this blackness there is one small light: Nicodemus, remembering the gracious yet challenging words Jesus had spoken to him in the quiet of an evening, tried to be his advocate, (**verse 50**) reminding them that by law Jesus should be allowed a fair trial before being accused. He was

shouted down and favoured with the worst insult possible – “Are you a Galilean too? No prophet comes from Galilee.” End of story.

How have you fared when you have tried to stand up for the right in an unrighteous situation? When men won't listen to us, be encouraged that God still hears, and He is in control.

“Love Men into Goodness.”

John 8:1-11. Everyone went home then, but Jesus had no home to go to, and slept that night in the garden on the Mount of Olives. Jerusalem would have been overflowing with festival pilgrims and it is possible that many of them had no booths to sleep in: in any case it was quite normal for people to sleep in the popular olive grove.

Early in the morning Jesus, with that calm bravery that still amazes us, returned to the temple courts and carried on his teaching to the people who, like bees to a honey-pot, happily gathered around him. But into this gracious scene came a jarring note. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees took upon themselves the responsibility of having authority over the uneducated masses. Unfortunately their view of authority was entirely wrong. As legal experts they saw it as a weapon to criticise, to censor and condemn. They had no conception that authority should be based on sympathy, that they should try to understand why the sin was committed, to try and reclaim the wrongdoer and help him to lead a different life. They did not understand that, as Barclay puts it, God uses His authority to love men into goodness.³

But here, they were not so much concerned with meting out punishment as with catching Jesus out in a tricky situation. They brought to him a woman who had been caught in the very act of adultery and reminded Jesus that according to the Mosaic law she should be stoned to death. Ironically they misquoted **Deuteronomy 22:22**, which stipulates that a man and a woman committing adultery should *both* die: why didn't those Pharisees bring the guilty man as well?

Their concern in this case was to trap Jesus into a compromising answer. If he agreed she should be stoned, Jesus would lose forever the name he had gained for love and mercy, and never again could he be called the friend of sinners. He would also become a criminal in the eyes of the Roman government, which alone had the power to inflict the punishment of death. On the other hand, if he elected to let the woman go free, he would be accused of breaking the law of Moses and of condoning immorality.

Jesus of course could see through their guile and skilfully turned their attack to recoil against themselves. In unresponsive silence he stooped down and began writing on the ground. Critics wonder at the reason behind this: there could be many reasons. Can you imagine the state of dress – or undress – the woman was in? Can you see the terror in her face as she awaited her punishment? And can you imagine the anger in the heart of Jesus at the cruel injustice of her captors? Perhaps he needed time to control his emotions, to seek help from his Father to deal justly with the situation. At his lack of reply the men kept on questioning him: maybe Jesus was hoping that repetition would drive home to them the monstrous cruelty of their accusation.

Suddenly Jesus straightened up, looked the tormentors in the eye and said, “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” Then once again he hid his feelings by bending back to his writing on the ground. The defiance of the men changed to sheepishness, as one by one, from the older to the younger, they slipped quietly away.

Once they were all gone, Jesus lifted his eyes to the woman as if he could see right into her conscience. The expression he used, “Woman”, was one of gentleness, “where have they gone? Is

there none left to condemn you?” “None, sir,” she answered quietly, and Jesus must have rejoiced at the relief in her face.

“And neither do I condemn you,” Jesus answered, “but go home now, and leave your life of sin.” He who was soon to die to purge this woman’s sin, could already extend his redeeming love towards her.

In Isaiah 42:3 is a lovely prophecy regarding the Messiah – “A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out.” We see this so clearly in Jesus, who dealt in tenderness with this poor bruised reed of a woman, freeing her from her tormentors and opening the door to a new and better life. And in his talk with Nicodemus we see the smouldering wick of this Pharisee’s faith, on which Jesus let the breath of his Spirit gently blow: in this story it was still glowing and later, when Nicodemus was needed to perform a vital role in the ministry of Jesus, the smouldering wick had become a steady flame of courage.

¹Quoted by William Barclay in The Gospel of Luke, the Daily Study Bible, The Saint Andrew Press, Page 131

² Souls of men! Why will ye scatter, F.W.Faber, No.206, Baptist Church Hymnal (Revised) 1933, Psalms and Hymns Trust, London

³ William Barclay, The Gospel of John Vol.2, The Daily Study Bible, The Saint Andrew Press, page 7