

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

John 8:12-30

The setting for our reading today is the Feast of Tabernacles which took place in the Temple each year five days after Yom Kippur (or the day of atonement) in late September or early October. For most festivals attendance at the Jerusalem Temple was optional, but the feast of Tabernacles (along with Passover and Pentecost) was one of the three festivals for which attendance at the Jerusalem Temple was obligatory. Giles introduced us to the background to the festival and to Jesus's attendance at it last week. It was a week long festival that celebrated the ingathering of the harvest each year, although the roots of the festival go back as far as the Exodus from Egypt and the entrance into the Promised Land. A celebration of God's faithfulness in His promises from the beginning right up to the present.

The Festival of Tabernacles was a week of great rejoicing and the traditional elements underlying that rejoicing are water and light. Just before our reading today at the end of chapter 7 Jesus has claimed to fulfil the water motif of the feast:

“On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "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.” (John 7:37-38 NIV)

and now Jesus turns his attention to the second element of the festival, light. So as we look at our reading for today together you can find the main text on page [***] of the church bibles and all the scripture I'm going to refer to will be displayed on the screen.

Let's begin with the first verse, verse 12:

“When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” (verse 12)

This is the second of the great “I am” statements by Jesus recorded in John's gospel. We looked at the first of these in chapter 6 a couple of

weeks ago when Jesus claimed to be “the bread of life” recalling the manna provided for the Israelites in the wilderness. In the “I am” statements Jesus clearly lays claim to his divinity and uniqueness by referring to himself as the “I am”; the name which God told Moses was uniquely his (Exodus 3:14).

So, in chapter 6, Jesus has said he symbolises bread or manna in the first ‘I am’ statement. In chapter 7 Jesus has already claimed to offer water to drink (John 7:37). Here Jesus says “I am the light of the world”, symbolising the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night which led the Israelites through the wilderness and completing the symbolism of the three elements of wilderness provision of manna (the “bread of life” from chapter 6), water (from chapter 7) and the pillar of fire (from this verse 12). Jesus also says that he is the “light of life”. Isaiah tells us that the servant of the LORD was appointed as a light to the Gentiles, that he might bring God’s salvation to the ends of the earth (Isaiah 49:6). The coming age of the kingdom of God would be a time when the LORD himself would be the light for his people (Isaiah 60:19), and that includes all of us who believe and follow Christ.

What a setting Jesus chose to announce his claim to be the “light of the world”. At the end of the first day of the feast in the ‘court of women’ (which verse 20 indicates is the probable location of Jesus's teaching) four golden lamps were lit amid great rejoicing. These were lit on each night of the feast except for the Sabbath as they were intended to symbolize the presence, protection and leading of the people of Israel with a pillar of fire and their commitment to the God of light. The Temple may well have been illuminated with a number of smaller lamps as well. Light is Yahweh in action (Psalm 43:3). Singing and celebration with music and dancing by ‘chosen men of piety’ continued through the nights of the feast, with the light in the temple illuminating the entire city.

In this setting, Jesus's claim stands out boldly. On the last night of the feast the lights were extinguished. So, as the feast ends and the lights are extinguished, Jesus proclaims himself as the true light of the

people of God. Indeed, the true light, not only of Israel, but of the whole world! That was a role reserved for Yahweh alone, so this was a claim of cosmic significance. But, that was not all, Jesus was claiming that those who follow him are delivered from darkness and enjoy the light. To have light is to have Jesus, for there is no light outside a right relationship with Jesus.

Jesus was identifying himself with the God who gave Israel this feast of the Tabernacles. But Jesus makes it clear that we must follow him in order to have this light. “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness” (verse 12). Unlike the candelabra in the Temple which were extinguished at the end of the festival, the light of Christ will never go out. This light is the “light of life” (verse 12), eternal life, which we’re given when we follow Christ. Christianity is not a leap of faith into darkness, it’s a step into the light – the light of Christ, a light we must reflect into this dark world. The closer we get to Christ the better we’ll be able to do that.

The Pharisees reaction to Jesus's claim is predictably critical, although they do not directly address the real issue – Jesus’s claim to be the light of the world. Instead they typically fasten on a legal technicality, they question the validity of Jesus's witness – look at verse 13:

“The Pharisees challenged him, "Here you are, appearing as your own witness; your testimony is not valid.”” (verse 13)

There are three specific points here. First, the legal technicality raised by the Pharisees doesn’t mean that Jesus’s statements are not true – the Pharisees are just attacking their legal validity. Second, the Pharisees are probably citing Jesus's own earlier criteria for validity of witness: “if I testify about myself, my testimony is not valid” (John 5:31). But they have once again misunderstood him, for Jesus's point was the one he will make again here, that his witness is not by himself to himself, but for the Father with the Father – look at verses 17 and 18:

“In your own Law it is written that the testimony of two men is valid. I am one who testifies for myself; my other witness is the Father, who sent me.”” (verses 17-18)

Third, the Pharisees are certainly also alluding to the Old Testament requirement that claims be corroborated by at least two supportive witnesses (Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15), of course, we can see this as being satisfied by the combination of the Father and the Holy Spirit. We can also see this as highlighting one of the most distinctive features of Jesus's teaching ministry, that is his assumption of direct personal authority. This was in direct contrast to the way Jewish rabbis taught, they regularly appealed to supportive authorities. True, Jesus respected the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, and repeatedly cited its words. But, even here, he came as one who fulfilled these Scriptures and so was sovereignly free in his handling of their witness. In any event, if God the Father himself bears witness to Christ's statements, which he most certainly does, who can deny their truth and validity.

So the Pharisees are saying that Jesus's claims have no legal worth and so there's no reason to accept them. But, they are judging merely by human standards (verse 15). Light establishes its claim and does so, not by arguments, but by shining. Light must always be accepted for itself, notwithstanding the objections of the blind.

The Jews respond by asking where this Father Jesus speaks of is and Jesus tells them that the Father is inaccessible to them – look at verse 19:

“Then they asked him, "Where is your father?" "You do not know me or my Father," Jesus replied. "If you knew me, you would know my Father also."” (verse 19)

We can only know God the Father as we know Jesus the Son, for he is the last and best revelation of the Father. It is in Jesus and Jesus alone that the Father is fully revealed.

Verse 20 seems to indicate a break in the proceedings, perhaps the rest of our reading was spoken immediately afterwards or perhaps it was some time later, we can't really know. Here, John tells us that the exchange was taking place in the court of women, where the thirteen 'shofar' (or trumpet shaped) offering chests were placed.

Interestingly this is near the hall where the Sanhedrin met, thus giving meaning to the words “Yet no one seized him, because his time had not yet come” (verse 20).

Anyway, let’s move on to look at verses 21-24:

“Once more Jesus said to them, "I am going away, and you will look for me, and you will die in your sin. Where I go, you cannot come." This made the Jews ask, "Will he kill himself? Is that why he says, ‘Where I go, you cannot come’?" But he continued, "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins."” (verses 21-24)

Jesus speaks of his ascension to the Father following his crucifixion. His death is contrasted with theirs, they will die in their sins but he will be resurrected. As the Amplified Bible puts it they will die under the curse of their sins. They’ll come under God’s wrath and his judgement. This is the worst place to die, read the parable of Lazarus and the rich man in chapter 16 of Luke’s Gospel. A rich man died in his sins. After he died he lifted up his eyes from the place of torment he was in. He begged for relief but was granted none.

In verse 23 Jesus differentiates himself from the Jews, they are worldly, of this world, he is heavenly, from above. In verse 24 Jesus makes it clear that they have only one way of avoiding the fate of dying under the curse of their sins – to believe in Jesus, to truly believe in him as Messiah, the “I am”, the Son of God. This also applies to us, we have only one way of avoiding God’s wrath and judgement and that’s through faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Master who died on the cross for our sins. Our text today leaves absolutely no room for the doctrine of universalism, not everyone will be saved, we must have a true faith in Christ. So don’t leave things too late, listen to the words of the prophet Isaiah: “Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near.” (Isaiah 55:6 NIV). NOW is the day of salvation.

Our reading goes on to speak further of the Father and the Son – look at verses 25-30:

““Who are you?” they asked. “Just what I have been claiming all along,” Jesus replied. “I have much to say in judgment of you. But he who sent me is reliable, and what I have heard from him I tell the world.” They did not understand that he was telling them about his Father. So Jesus said, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am the one I claim to be and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him.” Even as he spoke, many put their faith in him.” (verses 25-30)

Jesus tells the Pharisees that he’s who he has been claiming to be from the beginning. He goes on to say that he has many things to say about (not say to) them and these things concern judgement. Once more he thinks of his mission, the Father is “he who sent me”. Once more he asserts that his message is reliable because it rests on his contact with the Father.

The Jews did not comprehend this. Because they did not accept and recognise his heavenly origin his message was incomprehensible. This remains true for us today, unless we recognise the unique, divine nature of Christ we cannot truly understand and accept the gospel message.

Jesus goes on to say that they will come to recognise who he is after they have crucified him. “Lifting up” is rather an odd phrase to apply to ‘crucified’, but I think John intends a double meaning – lifting Jesus up physically on the cross and lifting him up spiritually or glorifying him. Jesus accepts the pain, shame and humiliation of the cross in order to bring salvation to sinners and so is glorified by the Father. There is also a revelatory aspect to the cross, after the crucifixion those who reflect on it will understand that Jesus was indeed the Son of God.

In verse 29 Jesus comes back to the intimate union that subsists between him and the Father. Jesus is always active in doing what pleases the Father.

Our final verse given us the end result of all this. As Jesus was saying these things many put their trust in him. They caught enough of the significance of all that was happening to take their stand with Jesus. I hope and trust that all of us here have caught enough of the significance of the gospel message to turn to Christ and take our stand with him.

Lets just close with a few words of prayer. Father as we hear your word, your account of what Jesus did and said, give us the faith to turn to Christ and to accept him as our Lord and Master, the bread of life and the light of the world who willingly and knowingly went to the cross and was crucified to pay the penalty that our sins deserved, that our sins demanded. Give us the faith to believe in him and who he is and to follow him faithfully and unswervingly. Give us the faith we pray to follow him and to stand with him not just this day but throughout our lives.