

Jesus in dispute

5 March 2023

INTRODUCING TODAY'S THEME

I do a sport called **orienteering** where you have to follow a map and visit various control points shown by circles on the map. It's a fun sport in summer when it's light but is much harder in winter when it's dark.

Running along streets at night is OK because there are street lights ... but then there are all sorts of narrow lanes and parks that are very very dark at night. And there's lots of things that can trip you up at night – uneven footpaths, branches and stuff left out for hard waste collection. It's hard to read the map in the dark while looking at where you're going.

So you need to wear a headtorch.

In today's Bible reading, Jesus says he is the **light of the world** and whoever follows him will never have to walk in darkness.

That sounds pretty good to me.

But I wonder what he meant ... maybe he meant that if we live the way he showed us – loving other people and helping them, and sharing what we have – that's living in the **light**. But if we only think about ourselves and what we want all the time then that's living in the **dark**.

BIBLE READINGS

Psalm 63:1-7

You, O God, are my God, earnestly I seek you;
**I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.**

I have seen you in the sanctuary
and beheld your power and your glory.

**Because your love is better than life,
my lips will glorify you.**

I will praise you as long as I live,
and in your name I will lift up my hands.

**I will be satisfied as with the richest of foods;
with singing lips my mouth will praise you.**

On my bed I remember you;

I think of you through the watches of the night.

Because you are my help,
I sing for joy in the shadow of your wings.

John chapters 7 and 8 (select verses)

Narrator Jesus did not want to go about in Judea because the Jewish leaders there were looking for a way to kill him. So when the Jewish Festival of Tabernacles was near ... Jesus went up to Jerusalem in secret, not publicly. At the festival the Jewish leaders were watching for Jesus and asking,

Leaders Where is he?

Narrator Among the crowds there was widespread whispering about him. Some said ...

Voice 1 He is a good man.

Narrator Others replied ...

Voice 2 No, he deceives the people.

Narrator But no one would say anything publicly about him for fear of the leaders.

Halfway through the festival, Jesus went into the temple courts and began to teach. The people there were amazed and asked ...

Voice 1 How did this man get such learning without having been taught?

Jesus My teaching is not my own. It comes from the one who sent me. Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own. ...

Narrator At this they tried to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him, because his hour had not yet come. Still, many in the crowd believed in him. They said

Voice 1 When the Messiah comes, will he perform more signs than this man?

Narrator The Pharisees heard the crowd whispering such things about him. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees sent temple guards to arrest him.

On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice ...

Jesus Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.

Narrator 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.

On hearing his words, some of the people said ...

Voice 1 Surely this man is the Prophet.

Narrator Others said ...

Voice 2 He is the Messiah.

Narrator Still others asked ...

Voice 1 How can the Messiah come from Galilee? Does not Scripture say that the Messiah will come from Bethlehem, the town where David lived?

Narrator Thus the people were divided because of Jesus. Some wanted to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him. ...

Jesus When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said ...

Jesus I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

Narrator Even as he spoke, many believed in him. To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said ...

Jesus If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

Voices 1 & 2 We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?

Jesus Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it for ever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. ... I know you are Abraham's descendants. Yet you are looking for a way to kill me, because you have no room for my word. I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence, and you are doing what you have heard from your father.

Voices 1 & 2 Abraham is our father.

Jesus If you were Abraham's children, then you would do what Abraham did. As it is, you are looking for a way to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. You are doing the works of your own father ... the devil. You want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him.

Voices 1 & 2 Aren't we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed?

Jesus I am not possessed by a demon, but I honour my Father and you dishonour me. ... Very truly I tell you, whoever obeys my word will never see death.

Voices 1 & 2 Now we know that you are demon-possessed! Abraham died and so did the prophets, yet you say that whoever obeys your word will never taste death. Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?'

Jesus Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.

Voices 1 & 2 You are not yet fifty years old and you have seen Abraham?!

Jesus Very truly I tell you, before Abraham was, I am!

Narrator At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.

MESSAGE

I wonder if you've ever experienced a sense of **déjà vu**?

Perhaps you have a 9.30 appointment in the city and you don't want to take the train because you're anxious about catching Covid ... so you decide to drive ... but when you get to the Eastern Freeway it's like a carpark. You're not going to get to your appointment on time!



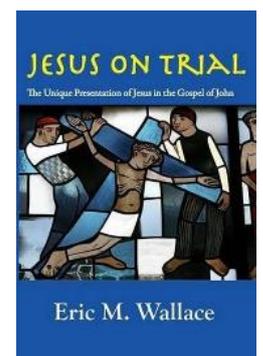
And then you remember a similar situation from the past of getting stuck on the Eastern Freeway ... that's **déjà vu** ... and you think ... next time, I'm **definitely** catching public transport!



Or perhaps you've been around the Croydon church long enough to have heard multiple times that the Hall is going to be demolished and the land subdivided for housing. But each time something comes up to prevent the Hall from going ... whether it's delays in getting a Council permit, the

plan of renting the Hall to Elisha Care or Covid lockdowns. So when you heard Charles report recently that the demolition of the Hall is actually going to happen fairly soon, you have this sense of **déjà vu** that we've heard all this before and nothing ever happens. ... Except that this time a contract has been signed and a date for demolition set for after Easter.

In the reading from John's Gospel this morning we get a similar sense of **déjà vu** ... here is Jesus **on trial** in Jerusalem all over again. The Jewish authorities seem to be in endless dispute with Jesus while the crowds – a bit like the jury in a court trial – are divided and not quite able to reach a verdict, with some supporting Jesus and others thinking he is deceiving the people.



The background to these chapters is the **Festival of Tabernacles** – one of the three great pilgrim festivals in the Jewish calendar – along with **Passover** and **Pentecost**. The Feast of Tabernacles is only mentioned briefly in passing but it forms important background for these chapters.

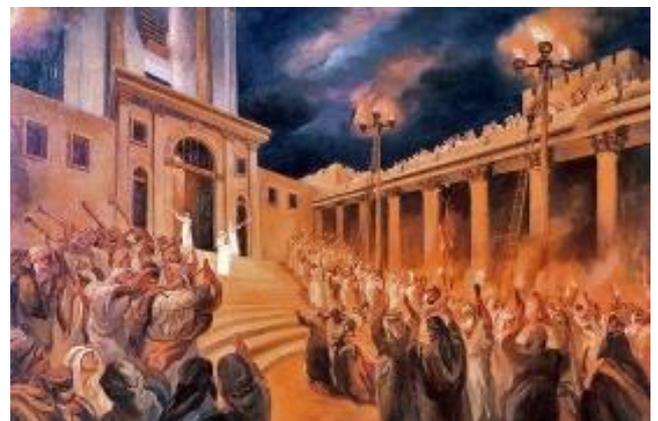
In part, this festival was a reminder of the Exodus where the people lived in **tents** or **tabernacles** as they wandered through the wilderness. Hence the people were encouraged to set up simple shelters and live in them for 7 days.



But there were two other features of this Festival that are relevant to these chapters in John. The first was to do with **water**. On each day of the Festival, priests would gather water in large stone jars from the pool of Siloam within the city of Jerusalem and pour it out next to the altar in the Temple, acting out the vision

in the prophet Ezekiel where water flows from the Temple and turns into a river, bringing life wherever it goes.

The second feature of the Festival was that it looked forward to the time of the **Messiah** when the nations would all come to Jerusalem to learn from Israel's God. So Tabernacles was a joyous festival with lots of singing and dancing, and the Temple would be lit up at night by huge oil lamps ... signifying its place as the **light of the world** that people from everywhere would be attracted to.



A passage in the prophet Zechariah captures these elements of the Festival ...

*It will be a unique day ... when evening comes, there will be light.
On that day, living water will flow out from Jerusalem, half of it east to
the Dead Sea and half of it west to the Mediterranean Sea.
The nations ... will go up year after year to worship the King,
the Lord Almighty, and to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles.
(Zechariah 14:7-8, 16)*

The bulk of these two chapters in John, though, is taken up with disputes and disagreements between Jesus and the Pharisees with the crowds as onlookers. The feel is similar to the disputes described in the other three Gospels during Jesus' final week in Jerusalem before the passion with various groups trying to trap Jesus. But in John's account, these disputes are ongoing throughout Jesus' ministry and provide greater insight into why Jesus was opposed.



From Jesus' side, he repeats again and again his central claim to be the one sent by God to bring life and light to the world and so to make God visible. Some sort of decision is needed in response to Jesus' claim ... whether to accept or reject it.

Three parts of Jesus' appeal tie in with the Festival of Tabernacles.

The first is when he cries out ...

*Let anyone who is thirsty come to me
and let the one who believes in me drink.
As Scripture says, 'rivers of living water will flow from within them'.*

Jesus' invitation echoes words from the prophet Isaiah:

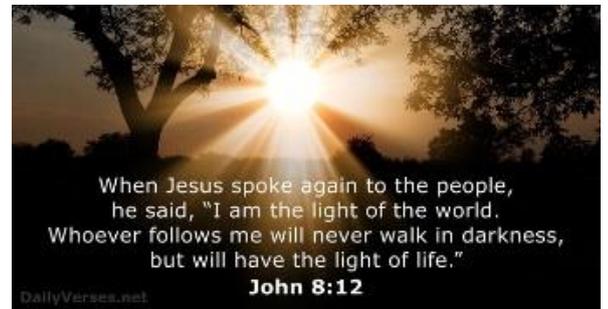
*Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! (Isaiah 55:1)*

It also reflects the cry of several psalms like the one we read earlier ...

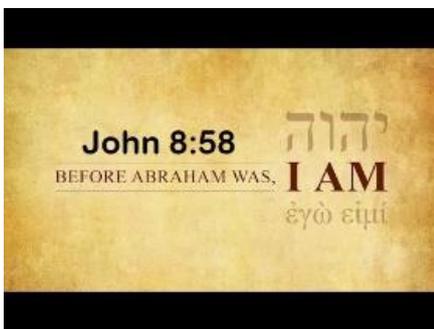
*You, O God, are my God, earnestly I seek you;
I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you.*

Jesus is inviting those who thirst for more of a life-giving experience of God to come to him and drink and so to satisfy their thirst. The **source** of this **life-giving water** is not the Temple as in Ezekiel's vision but rather **himself** as a living temple whose words reveal God and point people to God. As John writes in the prologue, what has come in Jesus is **life – God's life** – and that life is the light of all people.

So the second connection to the feast of Tabernacles is Jesus' claim to be the **light of the world**, such that whoever follows Jesus will never walk in darkness but will have the **light of life**, that is, the light that leads to eternal life. Once again, **Jesus** is the source of this light rather than the Temple and what is represented by the Temple.



The third connection with the festival is the wondering of the crowds whether or not Jesus truly is the **Messiah**. The crowds have seen or heard of the **signs** Jesus was doing that are similar to some of the signs performed by Moses and so they wonder.



But Jesus claims more ... as these chapters reach a climax with the debate about Abraham and whether the people are acting like Abraham's children, Jesus claims that 'Before Abraham was, I am!' Here Jesus claims for himself the divine name revealed to Moses at the burning bush, the name considered too holy to be spoken (Yahweh).

Jesus thus claims to share God's name and to carry within himself the eternal being of God, the closest we have in any of the Gospels of Jesus claiming to be divine.

The Pharisees quickly grasp the implication and pick up stones to kill Jesus, who, in their eyes, is clearly blaspheming, applying God's name to himself. When we lived in London, we lived in Golders Green, a strongly Jewish area similar to Caulfield here in Melbourne. When Liz shared this passage from John 8 with a Jewish friend, he also clearly understood what Jesus was saying.

While Jesus is claiming the high ground, his opponents question everything. The disputes are distasteful to our ears and sensibilities, yet other Jewish writings from the era show similar insults being hurled between opposing Jewish groups.

At stake is the **truth** and whether Jesus is speaking the truth about himself and about God. As I shared a couple of weeks ago, we readers form part of the jury and have to weigh up the various claims being made.

How does this ongoing trial against Jesus affect us today?

We are unlikely to have the same disputes as the ones John presents. But as followers of Jesus there is no doubt that we face accusations about our credibility ...

*We are sometimes seen as **hypocrites** – wanting to help the poor but hanging on to valuable buildings and wealth*

*We are seen as claiming to be **inclusive** yet rejecting the LGBTQIA+ community*

*Saying that we **love children** yet allowing abuse of children for decades*

Unfortunately, most people outside the church see **all Christians** as being the same, so every church and every Christian is seen as guilty of these hypocrisies and abuses.

Maybe, like Jesus, we need to gently push back against these caricatures and explain what we are actually on about.

Our best defence is probably to point people to what we are doing to be welcoming and how we are helping those in need. The challenge, based on today's reading, is how are we bringing God's **life** and Jesus' **light** into the world around us?

How are we reaching out to the lonely, how are we feeding the hungry, how are we shining light on injustice, how are we sharing God's life and love with our neighbours? Do our words and actions and attitudes bring glory to God?

These are some of the hard questions and challenges that arise out of today's passage.

