

SERMON NOTES

Fifth Sunday After Christmas

Synaxis Gospel

John 7:37-52

THE LIVING WATER

INTRODUCTION

The events, which John recorded in his Gospel in chapter six, occurred just before Passover, in the springtime, at about the same time of the year that we celebrate Easter.¹ In chapter seven, John has moved his readers ahead in time to the fall of the year. Jesus is in Jerusalem at the Feast of Booths, also known as the Feast of Tabernacles.

The Feast of Booths commemorated the fact that, 1400 years earlier, the new nation of Israel was led by God through the desert, after being delivered from the slavery of Egypt. During their forty year journey, the people lived in little temporary huts. The celebration, then and even today among Jews, is observed by building huts out of branches in which to live for seven days and/or in which to eat meals. The first and last days of the feast are especially significant and call for a solemn convocation. It is on the last great day of the Feast of Booths in Jerusalem that John begins the episode of our reading.

SYNAXIS READING

John 7:37-52

Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out saying, "If any man is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water.' "

But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

Some of the multitude therefore, when they heard these words, were saying, "This certainly is the Prophet." Others were saying, "This is the Christ."

¹Although both Passover and Easter are movable feasts, they are always close together because Jesus rose from the dead on the third day after the Passover on which He was crucified.

Still others were saying, "Surely the Christ is not going to come from Galilee, is He? Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and from Bethlehem, the village where David was?"

So there arose a division in the multitude because of Him.

And some of them wanted to seize Him, but no one laid hands on Him. The officers therefore came to the chief priests and Pharisees, and they said to them, "Why did you not bring Him?"

The officers answered, "Never did a man speak the way this man speaks." The Pharisees therefore answered them, "You have not also been led astray, have you? No one of the rulers or Pharisees has believed in Him, has he? But this multitude which does not know the Law is accursed."

Nicodemus said to them (he who came to Him before, being one of them), "Our Law does not judge a man, unless it first hears from him and knows what he is doing, does it?"

They answered and said to him, "You are not also from Galilee, are you? Search, and see that no prophet arises out of Galilee."

NOTES

Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out

There were three times in the year that the Israelites were commanded by God to gather for feasts. The first time was in the spring of the year (Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread).² The second festival time was timed fifty days after the first feast and was called Pentecost.

The last series of feasts was held in the seventh month, in the fall. It began on the first day, on which the Feast of Trumpets was held, the tenth day was the Day of Atonement, and then from the fifteenth day through the twenty-second day, was the Feast of Tabernacles, also called the Feast of Booths. It was a harvest feast and celebrated the care of the LORD for the people during their trek through the desert after the exodus from Egypt.

²The feast of Unleavened Bread lasted for 8 days and was preceded by the night of Passover which occurred on the 14th day of the first month Nisan. The Feast of Unleavened Bread continued through the 22nd day of the month. Both of these commemorated the salvation and exodus of the people from Egyptian slavery.

The feast of our reading is the Feast of Booths, commanded in Leviticus 23:42-44. The feast became so important it was sometimes simply called “the Feast.” The last day of the feast was very special and called for a holy convocation of the people in which no work could be done. A total of seventy sacrifices were offered during the week, possibly corresponding to the seventy ethnic people groups of the world.³

The Jews had added another ceremony to this feast that is not commanded in the Holy Scriptures. This was the ceremony of the waters. A golden vessel was filled with water from the Pool of Siloam and brought to the Temple. It was then poured out by the priest as a libation to God. This ceremony was performed as a request that God would send enough rain for the next year’s crops. A part of this ceremony was the chanting by the people of Psalm 118:25-26:⁴

“O LORD, do save, we beseech Thee; O LORD, we beseech Thee, do send prosperity! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.”

Possibly, this is when Jesus stood up and cried out to the people. Normally, Rabbis sit down to teach those listening. This was the custom of Jesus as well. But here, He stands to His feet and raises His voice to all.

When they cried out to the invisible God, “O LORD, we beseech Thee!” The visible LORD in their midst, Jesus Christ, responded with great emotion:

saying, “If any man is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink.

Jesus, of course, was speaking in spiritual terms. If the people, in their cry to God for salvation, were seriously thirsty for God, He called them to Himself and promised He will satisfy that thirst.

King David in Psalm 42:1-2, prayed:

“As the deer pants after the water brooks, so pants my soul after Thee, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.”

Jesus Christ is the answer to that prayer. He is the living God and will give life to all who come to Him.

He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, ‘From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water.’ ”

These exact words are not found in the Old Testament as it has been transmitted to us. However the concept is found in several places. For example Isaiah 58:11 states,

“And the LORD shall guide you continually, and satisfy your soul in drought, and make your bones fat; and you shall be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not.”

But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive;

³ The prophet Zechariah (14:16) had foretold that in the days of the Messiah all the nations would come to worship in Jerusalem at the Feast of Tabernacles (Booths). The ethnic groups were those listed in Genesis 10 and 11.

⁴ Other Psalms read during the Feast were what are known as The Full Hallel. It consists of: Psalm 113, Psalm 114. Psalm 115:1-11, 12-18, Psalm 116:1-11, 12-19, Psalm 117, and Psalm 118.

The Jewish commentators had already seen the libation of water ceremony as symbolic of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit promised by the prophet Joel.⁵ This outpouring would occur during the days of the great king and savior.⁶

John also comments to his readers that Jesus' metaphor of the 'living waters' was a reference to the gift of the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised to all who believe in Him. God in the form of the Holy Spirit would reside in the innermost being of the believer.

for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

Ten days after the Ascension of Jesus to the throne of God, He poured out the Holy Spirit upon the Church at the Jewish feast of Pentecost. At the last Supper, Jesus explained that He must first "go away" in order to send the Comforter (the Holy Spirit).⁷

When God is glorified, His character is made known. Jesus' glory was in His perfect obedience to and love for the Father, which was fully demonstrated when He hung on the Cross.

Some of the multitude therefore, when they heard these words, were saying, "This certainly is the Prophet."

The "Prophet" was the expected fulfillment of the prophecy given to Moses found in Deuteronomy 18:18,

"I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like you, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him. And it shall come to pass, that whosoever will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in My name, I will require it of him."

Others were saying, "This is the Christ."

The term 'Christ' is from the Greek translation of the Hebrew 'Messiah' which means anointed. The Messiah was the descendent of King David, Who would fulfill all the promises of God and reign over all the earth from Jerusalem as the Great King.

Still others were saying, "Surely the Christ is not going to come from Galilee, is He? Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and from Bethlehem, the village where David was?"

David, the second king of Israel, had been born in Bethlehem. He was greatly beloved of God and had written many of the Psalms that were sung in the Temple and by the people going up to the Temple to worship. God had promised that a descendent of David would reign forever.⁸

The prophet Micah had written of the Messiah,

"But you, Bethlehem Ephratah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall He come forth unto Me that is to be ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting."⁹

⁵ Joel 2:28-31.

⁶ Sukkot 55.

⁷ John 14:16; 15:26; 16:7.

⁸ 2 Samuel 7:12-13

⁹ Micah 5:2.

Because Jesus grew up in Nazareth, a town in Galilee, He was thought to have been born there. The crowd did not know that Jesus had been born in Bethlehem, just as the prophet foretold.

So there arose a division in the multitude because of Him.

Their lack of information about His birth and lineage caused much of their disagreement about Him.

And some of them wanted to seize Him, but no one laid hands on Him. The officers therefore came to the chief priests and Pharisees, and they said to them, “Why did you not bring Him?”

Jesus always had enemies, particularly among the rulers of the Jews. Earlier in the week of the feast, the rulers had sent out officers to arrest Jesus.¹⁰ However, the officers did not “lay hands on Him,” a colloquial way of saying they did not arrest Him. When the officers came back empty handed, it no doubt stunned the rulers.

The officers answered, “Never did a man speak the way this man speaks.”

Notice that it was Jesus’ words that so impressed the officers. Nothing is said about any miracles.

The Pharisees therefore answered them, “You have not also been led astray, have you?”

People were always of two different opinions about Jesus. Some thought He was a good man, while others thought that He was not good and led the crowd away from the right way.¹¹ The Pharisees belonged to the latter group, hence their sarcastic remark to the officers.

No one of the rulers or Pharisees has believed in Him, has he? But this multitude which does not know the Law is accursed.”

Later, after the Resurrection, Luke records in the Acts of the Apostles, “a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith”—that is many of them became believers in Christ. At the time of this feast, however, any member of the religious leadership who did believe in Jesus kept quiet about it, fearing the rest of the rulers.

The religious leaders prided themselves on knowing the Law of Moses, and they looked down on the rest of the people who were not so well educated. It is ironic, then, that these self-proclaimed experts were in fact breaking the Law—as Nicodemus diplomatically points out in the statement that follows.

Nicodemus said to them (he who came to Him before, being one of them), “Our Law does not judge a man, unless it first hears from him and knows what he is doing, does it?”

Nicodemus was one of them—a ruler of the Jews—and he had sought out Jesus to ask Him about eternal life. Earlier in the ministry of Jesus, Nicodemus had come to our Lord secretly by night because he did not want the others of his group to know of his interest in Jesus. In that discussion Nicodemus had said to Jesus, “Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher, for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is

¹⁰ John 7:32.

¹¹ John 7:12.

with Him.”¹² When Nicodemus said “We,” to whom was he referring? Were there others like him?

Nicodemus, not willing to expose himself as a follower of Jesus in this episode, later put his entire career on the line when he openly asked for the body of Jesus to give it a decent and honorable burial.¹³

In this episode of our reading, Nicodemus is simply asking that Jesus be given a fair hearing as the law of the Jews required, before any judgment was made concerning Him.

They answered and said to him, “You are not also from Galilee, are you? Search, and see that no prophet arises out of Galilee.”

Typical of people in the wrong, the rulers defended themselves by attacking the person of their questioner. They were in effect sneering at Nicodemus, “Are you one of this accursed uneducated mob?” But their next question exposed their own ignorance. There were several prophets who had lived in Galilee, and one of their prophecies concerning the Messiah was that He would bring a great light to the people living in that region.¹⁴

APPLICATION

Unless we are farmers or live in an area that is dry and subject to fires, as are portions of California, we more or less take water for granted. We hardly think about it; we just automatically drink it in some form during the day. Of course if we don’t like tap water, we lay in a supply that we do like. But that is about as far as it goes. We don’t throw parties celebrating water, where we joyously dance and sing and thank God for it.

In our reading for today, Jesus is at just such a party. Jerusalem is jammed with people from all over the country, who have come for this celebration. It is the fall of the year and the crops have been harvested and stored. Every year the people come to Jerusalem for this week-long party.

The date for this yearly celebration had been set by God fourteen hundred years earlier. His purpose was twofold. He wanted His people to always remember the care He had provided as they wandered like nomads in the desert for forty long years. At that time, He had miraculously provided food, shelter, and water, until He brought them into the Promised Land, a land “flowing with milk and honey.”

Secondly, God wanted His people to remember, and be thankful for, the care He had provided in the present year, shown by the harvest. He is a loving and bountiful Giver, and providing for His people brings great joy to His heart. Therefore He invited, nay, commanded, that everyone come to His house every year and party with Him.

¹² John 3

¹³ John 19:39

¹⁴ These were Jonah of Gath-hepher, Elijah of Thisbe, and perhaps also Nahum and Hosea. For the reference to the light in Galilee see Isaiah 9:1-2.

Over time, the Jews had developed a special custom for the party. On the last day, they would go down to the Water gate of Jerusalem and dip up water from the Pool of Siloam into a golden vessel that they carried to the altar in the Temple court. The priest would then pour the water out into a silver bowl, as an offering to God, and as a symbolic request that He send enough rain for the next year's crops. The people would joyfully go around the altar seven times, swishing with branches and chant:

“O LORD, do save, we beseech Thee; O LORD, we beseech Thee, do send prosperity! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.”

While the ceremony was, on the one hand, a thanksgiving and a request for physical water, the Jewish wise men taught that it was also a plea for relief from the spiritual draught the people had suffered for hundreds of years. Water, which gave life to the earth, was a symbol of The Holy Spirit, Who gives life to the soul. So, for many, the party was simply a great party in celebration of the harvest; but for those who looked deeper and saw the miserable spiritual state of the people, it was a cry to God for salvation, for the pouring out of His Holy Spirit upon them. They were a dry and thirsty land that desperately needed the life-giving water of His Presence.

It was in answer to that spiritual cry, that Jesus stood up and responded, shouting out to His people with great emotion,

“If any man is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, ‘From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water.’ “

The God in their midst, the One, Who so bountifully and joyfully supplied their physical water, was eager to supply the life giving Holy Spirit for their souls. But, just as they needed to go down to the Pool of Siloam for the physical water, they had to come to Him for the Holy Spirit. They needed to believe in Him, for He indeed was their Savior. In just six months, He would die to make it possible for them to have the Holy Spirit, to make it possible for them to live with Him eternally. They needed to trust in Him. He was the answer to their cry, He is the LORD.

Jesus is still the answer to our cry. He is the LORD. He has died so that our sins could be taken away. He lives to give us Life. The life giving water for our souls is His Holy Spirit, Who He promises to bountifully give us, if we will simply believe His word and trust in Him.

If God called the people to a party at His house to celebrate His provisions for their temporary physical life, can you imagine the party He is preparing for those who accept His spiritual provisions for their eternal life? The prophet Zephaniah looked far ahead in time and spoke of that party with these words:

“The LORD your God is in your midst, a victorious warrior,
He will exult over you with joy, He will renew you in His
love, He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy!”¹⁵

I want to be there, and I pray with all my heart that you do too. Meanwhile, He offers to give us His Holy Spirit, the Living Water. We only need to trust Him. What a wonderful God! What a wonderful Savior!

¹⁵ Zephaniah 3:17.