

Yarrow, April 18, 2010

Ps 63:1,2,3  
 Ps 130:2,4  
 Ps 78:7,9,11  
 Ps 107:3,4  
 Hy 55:4,5  
 John 7  
 Leviticus 23:33-43  
 Ezekiel 47:1-12  
 John 7:37b

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Last week's material on John 6 was hardly what we would call encouraging. You will recall: the people deserted Jesus by the thousands because they couldn't stomach His message of sinners having no life in themselves. So drastically was Christ's following reduced that He turned even to the small group of inner disciples with the challenge whether they too might want to go away. This challenge was recorded in Holy Scripture so that we too might consider the same question: are we OK with the reality of our being dead in sin, being totally dependent on God for each and every aspect of existence, have life only through Jesus Christ. It gave us all food for thought...

As it is, brothers and sisters, John in his 7<sup>th</sup> chapter lays out the only solution to the bankruptcy described in chap 6. Only in Jesus Christ shall the thirsty find satisfactory drink.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

## **JESUS SUMMONS THE THIRSTY TO DRINK FROM HIM.**

1. The Need for the Drink
2. The Promise in the Drink
3. The Answer to the Drink

### ***1. The Need for the Drink***

Our text has its setting on "the last day, that great day of the feast." The feast referred to is – says vs 2– "the Jews' Feast of Tabernacles". This Feast of Tabernacles was one of three feasts concerning which God had stipulated that every man in Israel was to appear before Him in His tabernacle (cf Lev 23; Ex 23:16f). So it was that Jerusalem, in the days of John 7, was a very busy place. People from far and wide gathered in the city for this feast; we read that Jesus' brothers too went from Galilee to Jerusalem (vs 10).

The Feast of Tabernacles (or Booths, as it's also called) was meant to remind the people of their sojourn in the desert after their Exodus from Egypt. That was God's instruction to His people at Mt Sinai. Said the Lord to Israel (I quote from Leviticus 23):

"You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All who are native Israelites shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God" (vs 42f).

The point was this: when this nation of slaves was delivered from their bondage in Egypt, God did not bring them directly into the land of Canaan with its houses and vineyards, its security and abundance. God first brought His people into the desert so that they might learn to live from God's hand, might learn that it is God who provides food and drink, housing, protection – in a word: it is God who gives security, life. That's also the reason why this Feast was to be celebrated "when you have gathered in the fruit of the land" (Lev 23:39). In the land of Canaan they had to remember their time in the desert, and what time of year was better to remember their dependency on the Lord (as spelled out in the desert) than harvest time; at this time of year the contrast with the nothingness of the desert became

so apparent, yes, at this time of year Israel's dependence on God's blessings became so very obvious. So it was that the people, when harvest was finished, had to take "branches of palm trees, the boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook" (Leviticus 23:40) and from these branches build a booth in which they tented for seven days – reminders of the fact that they were dependent totally on the Lord alone for all their security.

At the end of this Feast of Tabernacles –that should be, then, when the message of the feast had hit home with the people– the Lord Jesus "stood and cried out". Jesus, we may imagine, found for Himself a strategic place where His voice carried to the thousands milling about, and issued His invitation to the thirsty: "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink." He added these words of explanation: "He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water" (John 7:38).

We need to understand, beloved, what this invitation meant to the people who heard Jesus' cry. "If anyone thirsts," Jesus said to the people milling about. Jesus' point was not that this may have been a hot and dry day, so that people longed for a drink. The point is rather that this feast recalled the time Israel spent in the desert many years before. That dry and thirsty desert spelled out for Israel her dependence on the Lord, even for something so basic as drink. And Israel could know from their Bibles: in the desert the Lord God had supplied drink – recall the waters of Marah (Ex 15), recall also the water which Israel got from the rock when Moses hit it (both when he was supposed to hit it, Ex 17, and when he was supposed to speak to the rock but hit it instead, Num 20). More, the land Israel received was a land "that drinks rain from heaven" (Deuteronomy 11:11), be it the early rain or the latter rain (Deuteronomy 11:14), so that crops could grow abundantly under the good care of Israel's almighty and faithful God. At the end of the feast which focused Israel's attention on their dependence on the Lord, Jesus issued His call – and so reached to the heart of what the Feast of Tabernacles was all about: "If any thirsts, let him come to Me and drink." Said Jesus: your fathers in their thirst sought water from the Lord and He supplied; well, let the thirsty of today come to *Me*.

Were the people, on this last day of the feast, thirsty? Presumably not as far as physical thirst goes. But life was a desert still, with so much unhappiness, so many parched souls. And many in Jerusalem were precisely *that*, whether they recognized it or not. Consider the following facts:

- John places the events of chap 7 in the shadow of the events of chap 6. Jesus' instruction in chap 6 had been that people have no life in themselves; sinners need the "bread of life" (vs 35), Jesus Christ, in order to live. So dead are people, in fact, that no one can come to Christ "unless the Father ... drag him" (vs 44) – like a sack of potatoes. In the language of chap 7, then, people are dry and thirsty, barren and lifeless.
- Back in chap 5 Jesus had healed the man at the pool of Bethesda on the Sabbath, and then claimed that God was His Father. The Jews responded by seeking to kill him (John 5:18). That is why Jesus in chap 7 deliberately stayed away from Judea (7:1). But now that the compulsory Feast of Tabernacles was on, Jesus travelled to Jerusalem – and many of those to whom Jesus had spoken the words of chap 6 were no doubt present. They looked for Him (John 7:11), with some saying He was a good man, while others felt He was a fake who "deceives the people" (vs 12). Notice: nobody claims He's the bread of life, nobody claims He's the Saviour of the world. *That means they failed to identify Jesus as the source of nourishment He was.* In fact, the leading Jews remain convinced that they need to have Jesus put to death (see vs 19, 25, 30, 32).

Certainly, there's also the words of vs 31: "many of the people believed in Him." But the crowds as a whole, though they were celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles, though they were supposed to be concentrating on their dependence on God, did not want to acknowledge the Christ for who He was. Though He had said in chap 6 that He was the "bread of life", though He had said that no one could live without Him, though He had said that the people have no life in themselves without Him, they yet do not embrace Him in faith – *not even at this feast which spells out their dependence on the Lord God!*

That was why Jesus, at the end of this feast, made a point of addressing the crowds with His loud invitation: “If any is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink.” Jesus knew very well that all in the crowds in Jerusalem were spiritually thirsty; this was both the message of the feast as well as the reality underscored by the discussions of the last few days. All were thirsty, all should acknowledge this thirst, all should quench their thirst in Jesus Christ.

We for our part are immediately curious how the people responded. There are, however, two matters that need attention before we get to the question of the people’s response. I’ll get to the one momentarily in our second point. The other is the question of how *you* would answer this question. Would you consider yourself thirsty? In terms of physical thirst, I suspect we all know what that feels like. But how about spiritual thirst? What might that feel like?? Are you thirsty? It’s a question we do well to mull over for a moment as we proceed now with our second point:

## ***2. The Promise in the Drink***

Jesus’ invitation to come and drink carries within itself the implicit promise of satisfaction. In fact, in vs 38 Jesus lays out this implicit satisfaction with these words: “He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.” Though the sentence structure is incomplete, the point of the sentence is plain: whoever believes in Christ shall experience that rivers of living water shall flow out of his heart – and the grammar of the sentence allows for no other understanding than that this living water flows out of the heart of *the believer*.<sup>1</sup>

It’s quite a promise Jesus makes. “Living water”: we recall that Jesus had spoken with the Samaritan woman in John 4 about ‘living water’. To her Jesus had said that whoever drinks this water shall never thirst again; yes, this water is “a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life” (John 4:10ff). Such living water shall now flow from the believer?? How shall that be?!

To appreciate the flavour of the promise, we need to appreciate what Jesus means with the words “as the Scripture has said”. As it turns out, there is no text in the Old Testament which says literally that “out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.” Jesus, then, has not quoted literally. Instead, He has taken a passage of Scripture and summarised its message into a one-liner: “out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.” What passage of Scripture Jesus summarises? There are various passages of the Old Testament that speak of “living water”.<sup>2</sup> But Jesus’ words in our text do not highlight the notion of ‘living water’; Jesus’ words emphasize the notion of “rivers”, specifically *rivers that flow*.<sup>3</sup> The *one* passage of the Old Testament that speaks of ‘rivers that flow’ is Ezekiel 47.

We read the passage. Ezekiel 47 tells us of a “river” that Ezekiel “could not cross; for the water was too deep” (vs 5). In fact, this is a river that became deeper and deeper; the farther Ezekiel walked away from the source of the river, the deeper the water got – that is, it continued to rise faster than he could walk away from its source. At the same time, the waters of the chapter were not stagnant but flowing; the rivers are pictured in chap 47 as moving, as going to the “eastern region,” the “valley”, the “sea”. Altogether, here is an abundance of water, rivers of water, flowing rivers of water.

More: characteristic of these flowing rivers of water of Ezekiel 47 was its life-giving capacity. Says Ezekiel: “along the bank of the river were very many trees on one side and the other” (vs 7). Yes: when the waters of the river reach “the sea, its waters are healed” (vs 8). In fact, wherever the rivers go “every living thing that moves ... will live” (vs 9). Fishermen will spread their nets there, and catch an abundance. As to the trees growing on the banks of this river, “their leaves will not wither, and

<sup>1</sup> Grammatically, the pronoun ‘his’ cannot refer to any other person than the believer. See Jonggil Byun, *The Spirit was Not Yet* (Kampen: Kok, 1992), pg 149.

<sup>2</sup> Byun mentions Grosheide’s list: “Prov 5:15f; Is 43:20; 44:3; 55:1; 58:11; Ezek 47:1-12; Joel 2:28; 3:18; Zech 13:1; 14:8, etc.” He also mentions Hendriksen’s list: Prov 11:25; 18:4; Ezek 47:1-12; Zech 14:8; Ps 46:4f; Is 58:11; 44:3.” See page 161f.

<sup>3</sup> Byun, pg 162.

their fruit will not fail. They will bear fruit every month, because their water flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for medicine” (vs 12). Rivers indeed, rivers flowing with life-giving water.

Ezekiel tells us too where these life-giving rivers of water come from. Says the prophet: the water flowed from the temple. Vs 1: the Lord “brought me back to the door of the temple; and there was water, flowing from under the threshold of the temple.” And the temple, we know, is the dwelling place of God in the Old Testament. The rivers of healing waters of which Ezekiel speaks come from none else than God Himself.

Lay that vision now, beloved, beside the barrenness of the desert where Israel had wandered those forty years after their Exodus. More, in your minds lay that vision beside the message of the Feast of Tabernacles. That Feast said: remember your time in the desert, the time when your dependence on the Lord for life itself was driven home to you so starkly. Ezekiel says now: God pours out an abundance of water, water that gives healing, gives life, gives prosperity. In a word: Ezekiel 47 prophesies of the fulfilment of the Feast of Tabernacles!

Now Jesus says: “If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink.” And He adds: “He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.” You hear it: Jesus exposes the message of the Feast of Tabernacles –you are thirsty– and right away lays beside the meaning of the feast the promises of God in Ezekiel 47: God will give rivers of living water. Says Jesus: “If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink.” That is: the rivers of living water promised in Scripture come from Me. Jesus is God in the flesh, the Word who has tabernacled among us (John 1:14); from this Jesus flows the rivers promised in Ezekiel 47. The thirsty may drink Jesus, and they will have their thirst satisfied.

Yes, and so thoroughly will their thirst be satisfied that rivers of living water will flow out of the believer’s heart; barren, parched sinners will themselves become sources of life for others! See there, beloved, the wonderful abundance Christ gives!

Now the contrast is complete. The Feast of Tabernacles pointed up the poverty Israel experienced in the desert, and hence their dependence; the rivers of Ezekiel 47 pointed up the abundance God would give. The people of John 7 are thirsty, spiritually thirsty; they need living water, whether they realise it or not. In fact, through the popular rejection of the Christ their thirst was pointed up. In that context of thirst, Jesus promises so wonderfully much. Those very people who now were thirsty could come to Him, and he would give to them so much that they would themselves become fountains from which flowed rivers of living water. Talk about contrast!! And talk about wealth!

What an incentive, then, to the peoples at the Feast to come to Jesus! Who in all the world could offer more than this Jesus was offering?! Truly, we would expect the crowds to come running, to believe in Jesus. Here was a gospel too rich, too abundant to be rejected!

But before we get to that third point, there’s the pressing question again: what do *you* think of Jesus’ promise? That He would give to the thirsty so much life – does that excite you? Does that stir your appetite, make you want to drink? We’ll need to muse on that question as we move on to the third point:

That leaves our last point:

### ***3. The Answer to the Invitation***

The crowds, John tells us, did not come running. O Yes, there were those –vs 40– who recognised Jesus as “the Prophet”, as “the Christ.” But others passed Him off as only from Galilee, and so He could not be the Christ prophesied in Scripture (vs 41f). As a result, the people were divided (vs 43), so that some still wanted to arrest Him. In fact, it’s on that note that the chapter ends. The Jewish leadership roundly rejected Jesus’ invitation, and we understand the reason why: they simply rejected the message inherent in the Feast of Tabernacles that they were thirsty and needed living water. The

leadership, and so many of the people with them, did not wish to acknowledge their dependence, their emptiness, their bankruptcy; here is the same attitude as that of chap 6. But in chap 7 the responsibility for rejecting Jesus is the greater simply because Jesus has said more, has explained more about His true identity.

But we ought, congregation, not to pass judgment too quickly on the Jews for rejecting Jesus as the source of living water. Notice that when John writes down the events of chap 7 –and he does that, we realize, some years later, after Jesus’ ascension into heaven– he adds the explanatory words of vs 39. That’s to say: even the early church needed to have Jesus’ cry of vs 37 explained to them. What that explanation is? “But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.”

Says John: Jesus’ promise concerning thirst being satisfied, Jesus’ promise concerning being so filled with “rivers of living water” that these rivers flow from the believer’s own heart, refer to the coming of the Holy Spirit. This Spirit had been promised in the Old Testament:

“For I will pour water on him who is thirsty,  
And floods on the dry ground;  
I will pour My Spirit on your descendants,  
And My blessing on your offspring” (Isaiah 44:3).

That was the promise: John could then know that one day this Holy Spirit would be given to the thirsty.

When? Says John in our text: it would be after Jesus was glorified. That is: first Jesus had to atone for sin, had to receive divine approval from the Father in heaven for the work He would do. In other words, Jesus first had to go to the cross, had to die for sin, be buried, be raised from the dead by the Father, be received into heaven, receive from God a place at His right hand. *Then*, after God had glorified the Son, then the abundant rivers of living waters could be given to the believers, *then* the Holy Spirit could be poured out.

So it happened. On the day of Pentecost, the promise of Jesus to the thirsty at the Feast of Tabernacles was fulfilled: God in the Spirit came to dwell in the hearts of those by nature dead in sin, so that the dead were made alive, yes, became in turn also fountains of life for others around them. The book of Acts points up the abundant riches God gave to His people at Pentecost; His people received overflowing grace, gifts, powers so that they eagerly shared of their abundance with those around them who had need in any way. Recall the readiness with which the Christians of Acts 2 and Acts 4 sold their extras in order to give to the needy. Recall the eagerness of the early Christians to speak of the gospel to those around them, so that the spiritually hungry might be satisfied. Their dead hearts were made alive in the Lord so that they exuded not selfishness and jealousy and bitterness, but exuded instead love and joy and peace and patience, etc – for the abundant benefit of the many around them. The promise of God to Abram came to fulfilment: God’s children were made a blessing for the nations. See there the answer to the thirst – an answer that came not by the actions and decisions of fallen, parched and thirsty people, but an answer that came by the sovereign and gracious work of God Most High! *He* gave His Spirit so that sinners might have abundance of life!

How would you answer the question, then, about your own thirst?? Do you feel thirsty enough to heed Jesus’ invitation and come to Him for life-giving water?? Recognize, beloved, that your sense of thirst is twisted and broken through the fall into sin! I ask you about whether you *feel* thirsty, and there’s something inherently sinister about that question – for the implication is that you *need* to feel thirsty, but you’re too sinful to recognize the feeling rightly. And that leaves so much unsettledness....

In point of fact, though, the Holy Spirit has been poured out, not just on the people of Jerusalem on Pentecost day but also on *you*. Face it: you cannot believe in Jesus Christ without the mighty work of the Holy Spirit in your heart. You cannot even desire to serve the Lord without the renewing work of the Spirit. My point: you have received the Holy Spirit! So: your natural emptiness, your thirst, has been satisfied by Jesus Christ through the gift He has given; you have received the

fulfilment of the prophecy of Ezekiel 47 and the fulfilment of the cry of Jesus in John 7: rivers of living water have been given to *you!*

You, then, my beloved, are rich, blessed beyond compare! Though by nature dry and dead, the Lord God in abundant mercy has given you life, given you life abundantly. From you too may flow rivers of living water, may flow a great abundance so that others in turn can benefit from what you have received! It is God's wonderful ordinance, congregation: you are a blessing to those around you! God's gifts to you have not been in small measure so that you have scarcely enough for yourselves; God has given to all His own *abundantly*.

Such glorious reality gives so much encouragement to *be* a blessing for another! Give freely of the abundance you've received; give of time and money, give of the gospel – and so be a cause for healing for the sick and the weak around you.

Yet even the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost, and all the riches we've received as a result, is not the final answer to the invitation of Jesus Christ in our text. The John who wrote this gospel later in life was shown a revelation. That revelation included a vision of the New Jerusalem. In the New Jerusalem was "a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb." This river too gave abundance of life: "in the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month." John continues: "The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations" (Rev 22:1ff).

God, beloved, has already given an answer to Jesus' invitation in our text, and the answer is evident in your life; how encouraging. But there's more to come, for the Christ who was glorified will soon return to dwell with us. On that day our warped sense of thirst shall be repaired, and then we'll enjoy in perfect taste the abundance of God's gifts; "perfect blessedness, such as no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived...."