

JESUS AT THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES

A Reflection on the Human Struggle of Jesus

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AT THE TIME OF CHRIST the Feast of Tabernacles was the greatest Jewish feast. Full of rich and vibrant meaning, it offered thanksgiving to God for the gift of the harvest, for God's generosity to the people. It was a time of solemn rejoicing in this relationship in its many aspects, a celebration of Yahweh's presence with them. On the seventh day of the festival there was a beautiful water-pouring ceremony which had developed from an original prayer for rain.¹ Here the Jewish people cried out their fidelity and need to God. They asked for rain and deliverance from their enemies.² This was followed by the final day, the eighth day.

The feast profoundly connected the pilgrim with the history of God's covenant with Israel. The fragile temporary booth in which pilgrims took shelter for seven days, and through which you could see the sky, recalled God's fidelity during the precarious nomadic existence of the wilderness. Here Israel had discovered its dependence on its God. The memory of this transient existence in the wilderness contained an important teaching on the relationship between Israel and God, its reliance on God for water, food and guidance. God had guided Israel from slavery through the desert, in a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Exodus 13:21). God's presence, which had hovered over the Israelite Tabernacle or Ark, was a constant visible reminder that God had moved with the migrant people in their struggles. The Ark of the Covenant, where God dwelt,

¹ The feast was held in late September or early October. Rainfall at this time was a reassuring indicator of the much-needed further rain that would follow. See *The Gospel according to John I–XII*, edited by Raymond E. Brown (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 326.

² David Brickner, *Christ in the Feast of Tabernacles* (Chicago: Moody, 2006), 84–87.

had rested and moved on with the Israelite camp (Exodus 40:34–38), assuming leadership.³ Thus God had identified with their fate.

Tabernacles was a time of thanksgiving for the land of Israel, and celebrated God's guarantee of protection in the future. The hopes God had fulfilled in the past were an assurance of future provision. The symbols of water and of light were central to the festivities. A spectacular ceremony of light had developed, starting on the second night of the feast.⁴

The celebrations recalled a God who, despite being transcendent, had drawn extraordinarily close to this tribe. Here is a God who, by day and night, has acted as leader of God's nomadic people along their weary journey, protecting them and allowing the visible divine presence, the Shekinah, to draw them on as fire. God has journeyed ahead of them, creating immanence between God's faithful direction and their hard-pressed hopes.

It was entirely appropriate that a prophet who felt called to speak out on the destiny of Israel should attend this festival. According to the Gospel of John, a Jew who has lived a sheltered life in an obscure province of Galilee, and who has entered the public and political arena, comes up to Jerusalem for the occasion, risking his life to do so. A strange and intense religious debate around his person, with implications for his future safety, ensues. It is clear from the responses he provokes that here is a man whose identity can be tied down to unremarkable particulars. His opponents—labelled with the unfortunate term 'the Jews'—insist upon this point. He is from Galilee (John 7:41). Despite his assumption of authority, he has not been formally educated (7:15). He is not yet fifty (8:57). Nonetheless, he makes unique assertions about who he is. His words amount to the claim that he is, in his own person, the fulfilment of this great feast.

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Understandably, he is questioned, and the questioning he provokes is hostile. Some of the people argue that they already know him and his origins, hence he cannot be the messiah. Far from being overawed, they are more confident in what they already know about him than what they do not know. Distressed rather than haughty, he refutes their confidence with a great ironic cry: 'You know me ...' (7:28).

³ No analogy for this type of intimate divine leadership of a people is to be found in the other Middle Eastern religions of the time.

⁴ Brickner, *Christ in the Feast of Tabernacles*, 82–84.

All this takes place against the backdrop of a feast which celebrates God's greatest gifts to the people, God's provision for them and the gift of God's presence. The Roman occupation would have created a sombre background to these proceedings. And the recurring risk that the prophet could be arrested by the authorities of his own nation would have created anxiety for him and his supporters. It is in this context of human struggle, a theme so apposite for our times, that I wish to write about Jesus at the feast of Tabernacles in the Gospel of John. Jesus faced overwhelming human obstacles in his effort to fulfil his destiny. While we rightly strive to understand his teaching, we should also meditate upon this struggle in order better to understand his humanity. The full text of the gospel narrative may be found in chapters seven and eight of John.

The Family Offer Their Advice: John 7:1-9

From the outset of chapter seven it is clear there are grave problems facing Jesus in any attempt he makes to talk about himself at Jerusalem. 'The Jews' are 'looking for an opportunity to kill him' (7:1). The ensuing debate is set in the context of this risk. Should he go up to the feast at all? His family, naturally enough, are troubled. But their advice betrays a lack of sympathy with him. 'No one who wants to be widely known acts in secret.' (7:4) As families do, they point out what they think are the faults in his attitude. His wary response exposes the disunity within the family. 'Go to the festival yourselves. I am not going to this festival, for my time has not yet fully come.' (7:8) A marked man, his peril underlies any stance that he may take. According to his brothers, he ought to make himself known. If they are right, then secrecy is not the appropriate attitude. But he contradicts their proposal, showing that he knows they do not understand him.

The evangelist points out the poignant truth. 'Not even his brothers believed in him.' (7:5) You can see the loneliness of his burden. He protects himself by being misleading. Nonetheless, in secret, he does go up.

The Start of the Debate: John 7:10-36

Already, before the prophet makes his appearance at the festival, he is creating consternation and confusion. 'The Jews', that is, the religious authorities in Jerusalem,⁵ are looking out for him in order to persecute

⁵ Brickner, *Christ in the Feast of Tabernacles*, 94.

him. The character of their reception of his message is already decided. Among the crowd, however, there are differences of opinion. ‘While some were saying, “He is a good man”, others were saying, “No, he is deceiving the crowd”.’ (7:12) Fear of the authorities, contrasting with the joyous mood of the festival, oppresses the people, inhibiting any open discussion of his person. The man who will claim to be the light of the world is surrounded by impulses which are murky and fragmented.

The suspense builds up to the middle of the festival, when he goes up into the Temple and begins to teach. The opening of the debate justifies the caution of his earlier behaviour. ‘The Jews’ challenge his authority. ‘How does this man have such learning, when he has never been taught?’ (7:15) He responds, defending his teaching as from God. ‘My teaching is not mine but his who sent me.’ (7:16) Authority in religious matters was traditionally derived from discipleship under a recognised teacher. The issue at stake is fundamental; does Jesus truly expound their God, who he claims as his own Father? Should they accept such a definition under his authority?⁶ But he is under no illusions regarding their intentions. ‘Why are you looking for an opportunity to kill me?’ (7:19)

Ordinary people are sceptical and scornful. ‘You have a demon! Who is trying to kill you?’ (7:20) And yet his death is on the cards (7:25), an undercurrent which heightens the malevolent tone to the proceedings. He comes back at them from this vulnerable position. He defends himself, showing that he knows he is under their judgment. ‘Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment.’ (7:24)

Another group, with some knowledge of the plot against him, is perplexed on his behalf.

Is not this the man whom they are trying to kill? And here he is, speaking openly, but they say nothing to him! Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Messiah? Yet we know where this man is from; but when the Messiah comes, no one will know where he is from. (7:25–27)

They see that the weakness of the authorities against him speaks in his favour, and yet the problem for them is that they already know his origins. But Jesus cries out, challenging the extent of their knowledge and claiming to have unique knowledge of their God, whom they do not really know.

⁶ Francis J. Moloney, *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of John*, edited by Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1998), 242.

You know me, and you know where I am from. I have not come on my own. But the one who sent me is true, and you do not know him. I know him, because I am from him, and he sent me. (7:28)

The stakes are very high. Now that it has come to it, he is not being cautious. His declaration and the belief it inspires provoke the Pharisees to send the temple police to arrest him. In response to this intimation of danger he announces, 'I am going to him who sent me' (7:33). These are strangely autonomous words for one standing under threat of death. His opponents assess his majestic claim contemptuously. 'Does he intend to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks and teach the Greeks?' (7:35) They are so scornful of him and his claims that they would happily palm him off on the pagans. Meanwhile there is a lot of talk about his impending death. The crowd talks about it (7:25). Jesus talks about it (7:19). The high priest will be talking about it (11:50).

These scenes at Tabernacles could be described as a series of failed appeals, and record the dark and stressful atmosphere surrounding Jesus' declaration of himself, and the courageous, sustained effort he puts into the attempt. With varying degrees of malice and scepticism, he is



Christ Preaching before a Classical Temple, *Piedmontese School*

misinterpreted. He also inspires some approval. The scenes anticipate his trial and are littered with ominous legal references. Here we have a background to the arrest and trial, indicating that the final legal proceedings against Jesus were preceded by this perilous debate. Even at the risk of his life, the issue of his identity is central to his teaching. His repeated attempts to assert the truth about himself are repeatedly rejected. His opponents are scanning the evidence he provides to build up a case against him. Meanwhile the feast celebrates God's gracious designs for his people.

'Living Water': John 7:37–52

The outpouring of water was one of the themes of Tabernacles. A ceremony at which water from the Pool of Siloam was collected daily and poured out over the temple altar was at the heart of the festivities. On the seventh day, these appeals reached their climax. The people prayed, acknowledging their destitution without God and longing for salvation.⁷ On the great day,⁸ after the prayers have reached this intensity, Jesus announces himself. The power of his words contrasts with the fragility of his situation. The wording of the text indicates the effort that is involved for him. He cries out, and the cry is open to them all. The cry indicates the urgency of his promise and the energy he summons. His self-declaration goes way beyond his self-interest and security: 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water".'⁹ (7:38)

The phrase that Jesus uses, 'living water', is a highly significant one for his contemporaries, inhabitants of an arid country with their history of migrating through the desert in search of water. He is talking about flowing water, water that is not stagnant, water that brings life.⁹ He claims that he can quench the thirst of anyone who comes to him! The great ceremony they have just witnessed is a symbol pointing to his promise.¹⁰ His invitation provokes confusion and anger. The crowd is divided. Some people are convinced. Others want to tie him down. His

⁷ They prayed the 'Hallel' psalms, Psalms 113–118.

⁸ This was either the seventh or eighth day of the festival.

⁹ Brickner, *Christ in the Feast of Tabernacles*, 98.

¹⁰ See Ezekiel 47: 1–12.

words are very generous and open. Theirs are very paltry and particular. 'Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he?' (7:41)

And so he is a source of division. Some of the crowd want to arrest him, but no one does. Even the temple police have been moved and do not act on their order to bring him in. Their masters are angered. 'Why did you not arrest him?' But they reply, 'Never has anyone spoken like this!' (7:45–46) The Pharisees will not condescend to engage with the issues. A supporter, Nicodemus, gets taunted with the fact that he must be a Galilean too (7:52).

Jesus' words resonate with the life-giving aspects of the feast and its certainty in God's generosity and wonderful care for human beings. Yet his messianic announcements are taking place in a very sombre context and with little foreseeable hope of recognition. The strain of these days in Jesus' life and his lack of human progress are clear from the text. John charts the prolonged ordeal of the Galilean prophet. His opponents make their choice against him. Day by day the rejection of him unfolds and is sustained. He appeals to them. His invitations are unprecedented, compassionate, holding out a great promise. This is the aspect of the text which stands out for us today. But there is a dark aspect which would have been clear to the witnesses. As he gets closer to claiming the divine nature, he is getting closer to being lynched.¹¹

'The Light of the World': John 8:12–25

The light issuing from the huge candelabra in the evenings at the Feast of Tabernacles would have been the most staggering visual spectacle ever witnessed by the contemporaries of Jesus. All Jerusalem reflected the evening light emanating from the four great golden candlesticks in the Court of the Women. This light represents the divine light. This illumination represents the Shekinah, the Glory of God. It celebrates God's immanence. Now the defenceless Galilean preacher stands there and announces that he is the light of the world (8:12).¹² He can dispel the darkness in which every person walks. No follower of his shall ever 'walk in darkness'. His followers possess, then, not merely a teaching about God,

¹¹ The origin of the passage on Jesus and the adulteress (8:1–11), is disputed and commentators doubt that it belongs in its present position. Nonetheless, its place at the start of chapter eight of John's Gospel fits in well with the preceding and ensuing themes of opposition to Jesus, enemy manoeuvres against him and lynching.

¹² See Wisdom 18:3–4.



The Israelites Led by a Pillar of Fire by Night, by William West, 1845

but the very light itself. According to these claims, this careworn man, mercilessly pursued by the teachers of the law, fulfils the great symbolic spectacle. He is the meaning of the symbol.

God had led the people through the desert, making the divine presence known as a pillar of cloud in the day and a pillar of fire at night. The preacher is saying that he is the fulfilment of the festival, which he has attended in mortal danger. He is the presence of God, the same presence that had declared itself in the pillar of fire.

Even for his well-wishers and admirers these words must shatter, terrifyingly, every preconception of what a man can be, leaving them spiritually and intellectually in unfathomed territory. His opponents respond to this testimony of divinity in chilling legal language. Threatened, they challenge Jesus' right to make the assertion. 'You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid.' (8:13) But he defends his authority, using their own legal terminology. 'In your law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is valid. I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf.' (8:17–18)

As so often happens in human affairs, fear and hostility are quelling the dialogue that ought to happen. The Pharisees deny Jesus recognition. They insult him with their refusal and yet, with humility that is painful to perceive, he does not give up. His message is more urgent to him

than any need to protect himself or his own dignity. He continues to try with them, though from their response it is difficult to see why he thinks it is worth the effort. They reject him again and again. 'Where is your Father?' (8:19) He feels the frustration and hopelessness of it all. He shows his exasperation at the way things are unfolding, as if he is losing faith in his ability to reach them. 'Why do I speak to you at all?' (8:25)

His words have provoked yet another suggestion of arrest (8:20). The more he declares himself, the more closely he skirts the consequences.

'I AM': John 8:26-59

It is in this dark atmosphere that Jesus addresses the issue of his impending death. Here he acknowledges that he knows he will not win through, that they will achieve the outcome they desire. 'When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realise that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me.' (8:28) Yet within this horrifying outcome there will be a mysterious triumph which will vindicate his authority. Many among the crowd are now believers (8:30).

In the forthcoming dialogue his opponents resist his words to the point of trying to kill him. They seek his death, lending the scene a bleak dramatic thrust. For his part he is claiming identity with God. For his own reasons, he is drawing this knowledge from the privacy of his inner self into the public arena. The two intents, his and theirs, could not be more terribly opposed. The argument is extremely bitter on both sides. The insults against Jesus pile up. 'Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?' (8:48) He responds by saying that in him the Father's honour is at stake, yet another astounding claim. 'I do not have a demon; but I honour my Father, and you dishonour me.' (8:49)

One can almost hear his exertion in declaring himself and the determination of their refusal. The drama is extremely tense. What will he claim to be? Will they lynch him? God he may be, but in risking the claim he renders himself a man alone. His words are met by a desolate refusal to take them in. In their outrage, his opponents point back to his self-evident humanity and mortality: 'You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?' (8:57) But he turns back their challenge with a response that is as appalling as it is unanswerable. 'Very truly, I

tell you, before Abraham was, I am.' (8:58) They answer this with stones.

Even to our habituated ears, Jesus' words retain their power to shock. What would they have been like to his Jewish contemporaries, reared in a culture which revered the oneness of God? As if to prove their point that he is only a man, within seconds of claiming to be God he shelters from their stones. The revelation of God provokes not rapture, but a threat to his survival. They have been invited to reckon with his Godhead and they promote his murder. He has declared himself. So have they.

Having escaped their clutches for the time being he must retreat somewhere, and is bound to reflect upon what they have in store for him. His death is on his mind. Later, when he is honoured with an outpouring of precious ointment, the gentle gesture appears to him like the balm used to anoint the dead (12:7–8). He stands alone in a world which refuses his claims, and is left to await the outcome. If he is God, as he says, then we see God rejected, threatened by the harvest of this hate.

The scene has ended, not with a promising engagement between speaker and witnesses, but with an attempt upon Jesus' life. In the end he does what anyone has to do as a last resort: he hides himself. The claim to be God is opposed. He has to protect his all too human body.

The Human Struggle

At the Feast of Tabernacles the Gospel of John thus offers a picture of events before the arrest of Jesus. These events give insight into the humanity of Jesus. We see him reacting, struggling, explaining himself, growing exasperated, failing to convince. He uses the tools that a man must use: argument, clarification, appeal, the defence of words. In all this he is not invulnerable; the words fail. They can be, and are, rejected. While his regal words contain an inherent power for good, their power is frustrated by the conflict. He is hurt by the encounter.

Unlike at his actual trial, Jesus enters into a detailed and passionate debate with the audience about who he is, fully responding to the verbal attacks and challenges. The dispute is about the nature of God and the nature of Jesus. Astonishingly, he equates these two questions. Mercilessly, they try to argue him down in their response, countering his claims and searching promises. The antagonism in these scenes anticipates the passion;

it could be described as the crucial debate that precedes and is implicit in the passion. At the Feast of Tabernacles this intellectual contest is critical, a debate with which Jesus fully engages, despite the dangers. By the time of the passion narrative the atmosphere has changed. It is as if Jesus and his enemies are already fatally estranged. With a few exceptions, Jesus is no longer outwardly so engaged with the argument. It is as if he knows it has been lost and has entered into another phase of his experience.

John's marvellous record of the Feast of Tabernacles casts its own light on the silence of Jesus in his passion, which would be inexplicable and incomprehensible if it had not been preceded by this huge effort to communicate. We see here that Jesus did not embrace an obstinate silence as if he was willing his own death. On the contrary, at the Feast of Tabernacles he does everything he can to help his audience move into a deeper understanding of him and benefit from that knowledge, taking enormous risks in the attempt. At Tabernacles he tries to win them round with all his verbal courage and generosity.

We are used to reading this passage as a preparation for the passion liturgy¹³ and are not, therefore, always familiar with the thought that the outcome of this evocative dialogue could have been different. The contemporaries of Jesus are seeing a man who opens a promise for them, albeit one that they struggle to interpret. He assists them, using the language and rituals of their faith. The beautiful feast of Tabernacles facilitates his self-expression. We see how Jesus draws human strength from the Jewish faith that he fulfils. All that he is able to offer his audience, from his unique perspective, he is offering. He has offered testimony, through the sign of his miracles (7:31) and the power of his words, that what he is offering is true. As so often in human affairs, what ought to be a moment of possibility is harmed in its reception. Some, though by no means all, of the potential beneficiaries of his gift are hostile, determined not to accept his lead. The unrepeatably moment when he stands openly before his contemporaries as Son of the Father is refused.

The feast of Tabernacles recalls how the God of the Old Testament was protective of a migrant people. Recent tragic events in our own civilisation have forced on us the knowledge that for many refugees in

¹³ See the weekday Gospels from Friday of the fourth week of Lent to Thursday of the fifth week.

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our time life is a near-hopeless struggle.¹⁴ They appeal for an understanding from us which is often refused. When one contemplates lives as desperate and threatened as theirs and then turns to the wounded life of Jesus, the central tenet of our faith seems ever more astounding: that God became a man.

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¹⁴ Jonathan Freedland, 'A Photo Prevails When Logic Cannot', *The Guardian Weekly*, 11 September 2015.