

FOR THOSE WHO THIRST

by Ray C. Stedman

It's ten months until November and I confess I am already tired of the faces I am seeing and the facts I am hearing about all the candidates for President. With the single exception of my own choice, they are a very unimpressive lot! There may be a peacock among those turkeys, but if so I have not found yet which one it is. Yet, faced as we are with so many conflicting claims, it is really hard to know truth from error.

That must have been something of the atmosphere that prevailed at the Feast of Tabernacles, when Jesus taught openly in the courts of the temple in Jerusalem, as John records in the seventh chapter of his gospel.

Some of the people of Jerusalem therefore said, "Is not this the man whom they seek to kill? And here he is, speaking openly, and they say nothing to him! Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Christ?" {John 7:25-26 RSV}

I am sorry, in a sense, that the word "Christ" is ever translated that way in our Bibles. This is a Greek word that means "the Anointed," and that, of course, was the Messiah. Christ is not Jesus' last name, as many people think, rather it is a title for him. I would like to translate this word as "the Messiah" throughout this message. These people were saying,

"Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Messiah? Yet we know where this man comes from; and when the Messiah appears, no one will know where he comes from." {John 7:26 RCS Version}

What is impressive about this scene is the boldness and courage of Jesus. John has already described the rising tide of hostility and opposition toward Jesus; the threats of murder and rumors that the authorities were seeking to kill him. Yet in the midst of all this Jesus openly preaches in the courts of the temple and seemingly challenges the authorities to do anything about it.

So impressive is his boldness and courage that many of the people wonder if the authorities have not secretly believed in Jesus and recognized that he was the Messiah. But others remind them of the legend that the Messiah would suddenly appear, and no one would know where he came from. There is a verse in the last book of the Old Testament that says that God's Messenger (and by that is meant the Messiah), would suddenly appear in his temple {cf, Mal 3:1}. The rabbis took that to mean that no one would know his background. So these people are saying, "How could this be the Messiah? We know that he comes from Nazareth, in Galilee. He cannot be the Messiah." Thus there was a confusion in the minds of people as to how much to believe about Jesus.

Jesus ignores these mistaken concepts and this superficial argument about him and goes right to the heart of the problem -- as he always does -- in these words:

So Jesus proclaimed, as he taught in the temple, "You know me, and you know where I come from?" {John 7:28a RSV}

Notice that there is a question mark there. What Jesus really is saying is, "Do you know me, and do you know where I come from?"

"But I have not come of my own accord; he who sent me is true, and him you do not know. I know him, for I come from him, and he sent me." {John 7:28-29 RSV}

Here our Lord cuts right through all the argument and the debate to the real issue. "Do you really know me?" he asks. "No, you do not, for my true origin is not Nazareth." (They did not even know about Bethlehem.) He has been saying all along, "I am the true bread sent down from heaven. I came from God, I know him, but

you do not, because if you did know him you would know that I came from him," {cf, John 6:32-34}. This is our Lord's argument all the way through.

Twice in the past year I have had the opportunity of meeting with groups of Jewish rabbis and dialoguing with them about Jesus, about their faith, and about the Old Testament and its teachings. I have discovered that there is one thing you do not say to them: You do not accuse them of not knowing God! There was an uproar last year when a Southern Baptist pastor declared openly that God does not hear the prayers of Jews. What a tremendous controversy that caused, and rightly so, because that is a misunderstanding of the teaching of the Scriptures. God does hear the prayers of Jews, as he hears the prayers of anyone who prays sincerely from the heart.

But notice the reaction of the leaders who were listening to Jesus. It is like pouring gasoline on a fire to say to these acknowledged religious leaders of the nation, "You do not know God." Yet Jesus says this deliberately, fully understanding what their reaction would be.

Why would he do this? When you read this account I hope you ask yourself questions like that, because they will help you to understand what is happening. Is Jesus a troublemaker who delights in taunting these Jewish leaders? Does he take pleasure in overturning the apple cart, so to speak, and forcing them to hear things they do not want to hear? The answer, of course, has to be, "No, he is not that kind of a person." Our Lord is not a troublemaker, a revolutionary out to overthrow the system, though many today try to make him out to be that. No, rather, Jesus is a truth-teller in a world of self-delusion where men follow after lies and fantasies. Our Lord is the very epitome of truth.

There is an intriguing phrase that is used several times in the epistles: "As the truth is in Jesus," {Eph 4:21}. Here is someone who deals with life exactly the way it is. He does not dress it up or overbalance one aspect of it against another. He tells it just the way it is. He sees absolutely clearly and truly what is there, and what he sees he says. That is what distresses men. We are not even remotely aware of how much of our lives are spent in believing lies, fantasies and false philosophies that are without foundation in fact. But our Lord understands. When he speaks the truth, he upsets people because they would rather believe a pleasant and enjoyable lie.

The reaction to his words, therefore, is predictable:

So they sought to arrest him; but no one laid hands on him, because his hour had not yet come. Yet many of the people believed in him; they said, "When the Messiah appears, will he do more signs than this man has done?" {John 7:30-31 RSV}

That is an accurate description of what always happens when the good news about Jesus is preached. If the gospel is truly preached, a two-fold reaction will always result:

First, some people are going to be very upset and angry. This is what the Apostle Paul also found to be true. In Second Corinthians he wrote that, as he went about preaching, he found two reactions. To some he was an "aroma of death unto death," {cf, 2 Cor 2:16a}. They were already dying, perishing people. What he said to them only upset them even more because it challenged their concepts about themselves and about life and forced them either to change or go on the way they were. They chose to continue as they were and were led further into darkness and destruction. That is going on all around us yet today as people reject the truth and follow after false ideas.

But then there is the other reaction, as John records: "many believed." Many saw this good news as "an aroma of life unto life" {2 Cor 2:16b}, as Paul described it. Here was Someone who was at last stripping away the illusions, taking down the facades, removing the mists and making people see and understand who they really were, how much God loved them and wanted to change and heal and restore them.

This gospel will cause division at times. This is surely what Jesus meant in those amazing words in the twelfth chapter of Luke: "Do you think that I came to send peace on earth? No, I came to send fire. I came to send a sword. I came to set people at enmity one with another, so that your enemies will be those of your own

household, fathers against children. family member against family member," {cf, Luke 12:51-54}. That is the nature of truth. When you believe it, and obey it, it will create division at times.

The only reaction we need to note here is that our Lord kept right on with his preaching.

The Pharisees heard the crowd thus muttering about him, and the chief priests and Pharisees sent officers to arrest him. Jesus then said, "I shall be with you a little longer, and then I go to him who sent me; you will seek me and you will not find me; where I am you cannot come." The Jews said to one another, "Where does this man intend to go that we shall not find him? Does he intend to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks and teach the Greeks? What does he mean by saying, 'You will seek me and you will not find me,' and, 'where I am you cannot come?'" {John 7:32-34 RSV}

It is encouraging to see how clearly our Lord perceived that his time had not yet come, therefore no one could touch him or stop him until the Father allowed it to happen. That is the only explanation we can give for these bold words of Jesus. He is aware of the unseen protecting hand of God.

All through the Scriptures, and through much of the life of the church, you can see evidence after evidence and example after example of this kind of thing. This to me is very encouraging. In the book of Acts we read that when the Apostle Paul first preached in Corinth he was afraid because an angry opposition developed toward him. But Jesus appeared to him and told him not to fear because nobody would hurt him, {cf, Acts 18:9-10}. God was invisibly protecting his messenger. Our Lord senses this protection. He is confident that no one can touch him, and so he continues his ministry with the awareness that all the opposition against him could go no further than God's mighty hand would permit.

This is greatly encouraging to Christian witness today. If we are walking in the will of God, and the strength of God, we can be confident that nothing can happen to us except what God allows; and when he allows it, it is the right time for it to happen. That is one of the great lessons of the Christian life. This explains why Daniel was so comfortable in the lion's den. Can't you imagine him ordering a lion to lie down so he could make a pillow of him? Daniel knew that God had shut the mouths of the lions and they would not hurt him.

Granted, one can take advantage of this, and become presumptuous. Years ago I heard someone say to Dr. J. Vernon McGee, "I have been studying the Bible, and I believe I am absolutely safe in God's hand. No matter what I do, or how dangerous it may be, he is going to protect me. If I stepped out into a busy street against a red light I would be perfectly safe if my time had not yet come." Dr. McGee replied, "If you are foolish enough to step out into traffic against a red light at the rush hour, brother, your time has come!" We must remember that even the Lord teaches us, through his temptation in the wilderness, that we are not to tempt God. If we are fulfilling his will, and doing what he sends us to do, we can be confident that we are kept by angelic presence, safe until God's moment strikes.

So observe our Lord's boldness here. He even announces what he is going to do. He gives his itinerary, "I am going to be with you just a little while longer and then I will go away to him who sent me. You will seek for me but you will not find me." This throws his hearers into confusion. "What is he talking about?" they say. "Is he going to leave the country and go away to the Jews in foreign lands (the Dispersion)? Is he going to preach to the Gentiles?"

Jesus here indicates for the first time, in these strange words, the process by which all that he has promised will be fulfilled. This next paragraph is often taken to be a kind of parenthesis, but it is not. Rather it is really the answer to these questions of the Jews, "How is he going to do this? What does he mean 'I am going away and you can't find me?'" Here is his answer:

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed, "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. {John 7:37-39 RSV}

John is writing this gospel on our side of the day of Pentecost, after that wonderful day when the Spirit was given in great power and came into the hearts of believers to do his office work of making Jesus Christ visible to the inner eye of the soul. It is not a joke when people say they have talked with him, that they follow him, and he comforts them, and strengthens them. It is a genuine experience in which Jesus himself is really present by means of the coming of the Spirit.

But when Jesus was yet on earth the Spirit had not yet been given in that way. The Spirit of God is always present everywhere in the world. He was present before the day of Pentecost as well as afterward. But not in this sense. He was not performing this ministry of making Jesus real -- at least not as fully as he has been doing it since the day of Pentecost. So for the first time we have our Lord's hint of how this is all going to be accomplished. "I must leave, I am going back to him who sent me, but when I do so I will send the Spirit." Later on in this gospel our Lord enlarges upon this, in the great Upper Room Discourse found in Chapters 13-17. But now he teaches it by means of a beautiful symbol.

Each day during the seven days of the Feast of Tabernacles, one of the chief priests would lead a procession down through the Kidron Valley to the pool of Siloam (which, by the way, means "sent", "the one sent"). Out of the waters of the pool he would fill a golden pitcher and carry it back to the temple and pour it over the altar to remind the people of the days in the barren wilderness when God gave them water out of a rock. Then the people would shout and wave palm branches, rejoicing and praising God. But on "the great day," the last day, there was not such ceremony because this day had been added to the feast. It was on this day that Jesus seized the opportunity to cry aloud, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink." By that, he means, of course, "I am the Rock. I am the very Rock that those in the wilderness drank from." These words are confirmed by Paul in First Corinthians 10:4: "They all drank of the Spiritual Rock which followed them, and that Rock was Christ," {cf, 1 Cor 10:4 KJV}. So there in the wilderness God was teaching the same truth that he is teaching us today: Jesus is the Rock from which men can drink and satisfy the thirst of their hearts.

Notice Jesus does not limit the word, *thirst*. He says simply, "If any one thirst." People thirst for many things. Some are thirsting for significance. They want to feel like they are important, that they belong, they are somebody. People whom society overlooks, those who are not wealthy, or handsome, or have strong personalities, thirst to be regarded as important. To those Jesus says, "If you thirst, come to me. You will find the very significance you seek." Some are looking for power, the ability to accomplish things. Jesus says to such, "If that is what you want, come to me. Drink of me. Listen to my words. Come into a personal relationship. Let me walk with you. Draw from my wisdom, from my strength, from my presence with you. Your thirst for power will be satisfied."

Physical thirst is the most powerful drive known to man. The sex drive can be contained, you can even deny satisfying hunger for weeks at a time, but one thing you cannot leave unsatisfied is thirst. It becomes a driving demon that takes over the whole of your life and makes you think of nothing else but satisfying it. That is what Jesus means. If you feel yourself driven, wanting something, restless and thirsty and longing for satisfaction, then his invitation is, "Come unto me and drink, and by means of the Spirit, which I will give to those who believe in me, I will satisfy that thirst."

But notice how he will satisfy it. This is the most beautiful part about this. He does not say, "If anyone come unto me and drink, I will meet his needs." That is what many people today think Christianity is all about. There is a false form of Christian faith that says, "If you come to Jesus he will meet all your needs. He will satisfy you apart from anyone else." That is in line with the desires of the "me generation" of our day, the generation that thinks only in purely selfish terms of how they can have their needs met. But Jesus does not say that -- although that is true. Notice how he will meet that need: "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me ... 'Out of his heart [he actually uses the word "belly," not "heart," out of his bowels, out of his innermost being] shall flow [not just a river, but] rivers of living water.'"

What does he mean by that? The true sign of the Spirit is that you become a blessing to somebody else; someone else is helped through you. Your concern is to reach out to someone else in need and help him. When that happens you will find that your own thirst has been slaked; you will find a deep satisfaction of heart. I have learned to look for this. When people tell me that what they have found is only satisfying them, I have grave doubts as to whether it is real or not. But when I see that what they have found leads them to reach out to

needy people around them and to minister to them, then I know that it is the Spirit of grace doing what Jesus said would happen -- rivers of living water are flowing through them to others to satisfy their need. Only when you truly drink of him do these rivers begin to flow.

John traces three results that followed these gracious words of Jesus.

First, we see again the same two-fold division among his hearers:

When they heard these words, some of the people said, "This is really the prophet" [i.e., the one Moses predicted would come who would be like him]. Others said, "This is the Messiah." But some said, "Is the Messiah to come from Galilee? Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?" So there was a division among the people over him. {John 7:40-43 RSV}

But there is also a kind of strange, awed impotence among his enemies:

Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him.

The officers then went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, "Why did you not bring him?" The officers answered, "No man ever spoke like this man!" {John 7:44-46 RSV}

This is one of the humorous incidents of the gospels. Can you imagine how these chief priests felt when the very officers whom they sent out to arrest Jesus returned, having been arrested by him? "Where is he?" the priests demanded. "You knew where he was. Why didn't you bring him?" We can almost hear the response of the men, "Well, it is hard to tell exactly what happened, but as we were listening to him he somehow got through to us. We became so wrapped up in what he was saying we forgot what we set out to do. We have to say that we have never heard anybody speak like this man."

Let me ask you,

- Do you know Jesus in this way?
- Do you listen to his words?
- Do you think through what he is saying to you?
- Have you found yourself arrested by the One whom men seek to arrest?

The third thing that resulted from Jesus' word was the bitter hatred of his enemies.

The Pharisees answered them, "Are you led astray, you also?" {John 7:47 RSV}

Do you hear the anger and the contempt in those words?

"Have any of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him?" {John 7:48 RSV}

Do you hear the pride and the pompous superiority in those words?

"But this crowd, who do not know the law, are accursed." {John 7:49 RSV}

"Why do you listen to these common people?" Do you hear the snobbishness and the contempt in those words?

But then Nicodemus, one of their own, speaks. We have already seen (in the third chapter) that Jesus had met with him and changed him:

Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?"

{John 7:50-51 RSV}

Nicodemus raises a word of caution. "Be careful, you are about to take an impetuous action that is going to end up in violating the very Law that you claim to maintain."

But notice their sarcastic response:

They replied, "Are you from Galilee too? Search and you will see that no prophet is to rise from Galilee." {John 7:52 RSV}

Read that way, of course, they were absolutely wrong. Three prophets had already arisen from Galilee. Jonah clearly was one. Nahum and Hosea very likely came from Galilee also. I think, however, they did not really say this. One of the oldest manuscripts of the Gospel of John says, "Search and you will see that the prophet does not rise from Galilee." That was a reference to the prophet predicted by Moses, and that is probably what they meant. Even in their mistaken concepts of Jesus they would hardly be as wrong about their history as the usual translation suggests.

But the point, of course, is, they were sarcastic, pompous, cynical, and calloused in their attitude. This is often the reaction of those who are disturbed by the words of Jesus.

I want to close this message, however, not on this negative note where John leaves us, but on those gracious words of Jesus, "If any one thirst..." What a wonderful word that is! "If any one thirst..."

Remember the popular song of a few years ago, *Is This All There Is?* Do you feel that way about life? Are you looking for more? Well, do not look for it in travel, in increased business success, in new gadgets, in cars or houses or things. They will never satisfy your thirst. Although some of you know that, you still keep doing it.

Here is what will satisfy your thirst: "If any one thirst, let him come unto me, and keep on drinking." As you listen to Jesus, as you draw upon the fact of his presence, as you lean on his grace, and enjoy his love, and his acceptance you will find that he will change you. And one of the signs of that change, as certain as tomorrows sunrise, is that you will begin to think of somebody other than yourself. You will reach out to the hurting around you, and when you do that your own heart will be satisfied. Meaning, significance, power and companionship will come into your life.

That is the promise of Jesus. I hope many will claim it today.

Prayer:

Thank you, Lord, for these searching words. One thing we do see clearly as we read this account is that you understand us. You know men. Truly, what we have heard, built upon your name, is real: Jesus Exactly Suits Us Sinners. We thank you for that and for the reality of this experience in the lives of many here today who can give testimony of it. We pray that all may do so. In your name. Amen.

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