

**12th May 2019: Easter 4**  
**Letting God Wash, Cleanse and Feed us: the secret to real life**

**Readings:** Acts 9: 36-43; John 10: 22-30. Rev 7:13-17

**Sentence:** Yahweh is my shepherd, I lack nothing. In meadows of green grass he lets me lie. To the waters of repose he leads me; there he revives my soul. [*Psalm 23: 1-2 Jerusalem Bible*]

**Prayer**

Lord, may your Holy Spirit take these words of mine and use them to speak to the hearts and minds of your people today, that we might bring glory to your name.  
Amen.

**Intro**

Now, I know that today is Mothers' Day and in some ways it would be appropriate to focus on our reading in Acts – the story of Dorcas/Tabitha whose good works and service to the community remind us of the many ways in which our mothers love us and care for us, but this morning I am going to be looking at our reading from John's Gospel and how it links with our theme for today.

**Feast of Dedication**

Let's begin where our reading begins: "It was the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem." The Feast of Dedication was not one of the three great pilgrim feasts of the OT when, if he could, every Jewish man was expected to go up to Jerusalem to celebrate. This feast was relatively recent, dating back to 164BC – the time between the OT and the NT – and you may know it by its Jewish name: Hanukkah. At that time, the Jews had returned from their exile in Babylon, but they were now part of the Greek Empire established by Alexander the Great. The current ruler, Antiochus IV, was determined to make them adopt Greek customs and beliefs. He banned Sabbath observance and circumcision and burnt the books of the Law. The final straw came in 167 BC when Jerusalem was overrun and the Temple was desecrated. As a deliberate insult, pig's flesh was sacrificed on the altar and the people were made to offer sacrifices to pagan gods like Zeus. This outrage incensed pious Jews and caused a revolt. A group of them fled to the mountains and from there they carried out a guerrilla campaign which was ultimately successful. The Jews recaptured Jerusalem, and the Temple was ceremonially purified and rededicated to Yahweh in an eight-day celebration. Lamps were lit in people's homes as well as in the Temple, as they are today, so this festival is also called the Feast of Lights. It begins on the 25<sup>th</sup> of the Jewish month of *Chislew* (*Kislev*) – and so roughly corresponds to our Christmas Day. Interesting!

That's rather a long introduction but I want you to keep it in mind as we look further into the story because John often links Jesus' teaching with particular festivals.

Jesus and his followers are walking in Solomon's Colonnade a covered area next to the Temple which gave them some protection from the cold winter winds. Jews often gathered there after a temple service to discuss issues of the day. Then a group of them surround Jesus and accost him. "How much longer are you going to keep us in suspense? Give us a straight answer. If you are the messiah – then tell us so." Now, they could have been sincere searchers after the truth, looking for the One who was to come. But in view of what happens next, it is far more likely that they were

trying to trap Jesus into some sort of admission, so that they could charge him with blasphemy. In v31 John says that some of them had picked up stones, ready to carry out the decreed punishment of death by stoning.

What is Jesus' response? As he so often does Jesus refuses to give them the answer they are looking for. "I have told you, but you didn't believe," he says. "The works I do in my Father's name give evidence about me. But you don't believe because you don't belong to my sheep."

In other words, Jesus is saying is that they haven't heard or seen who he is because they are not looking for a Messiah like him. He's not the sort of Messiah they want. Perhaps they are looking for someone like Judas Maccabaeus – Judas the Hammer – who would give the Romans a hammering.

Nevertheless, the works that Jesus has been doing should have alerted them to who he is. Remember when John the Baptist sends his disciples to Jesus to ask if he is the one who is to come or should they expect someone else. (Luke 7) Jesus doesn't give them a direct answer either. Instead he demonstrates who he is by healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, and so on, because this is just what the prophet Isaiah said the messiah would do.

John's disciples go back satisfied, but the Jews confronting Jesus either cannot or will not recognise him. They are looking for a particular type of answer and Jesus is not giving it to them. It is not that Jesus has not answered the question, but Jesus did not answer the question in the way that they expected to hear it. I think this can be a challenge for us as well. Sometimes, in order to hear Jesus' answers to our questions, we need to let go of what we want to hear and listen to what Jesus is actually saying.

It can be hard to let go of our preconceptions. It can be hard to think that we might be the baddies and not the goodies and yet that is almost what Jesus is saying to these Jerusalem Jews. "You are not my sheep", he says. "My sheep listen to my voice and I know them and they follow me." Now, this is a nation steeped in the stories sheep and shepherds; of David, the Shepherd king; the Psalms are their hymnbook: "The Lord is my Shepherd" – Psalm 23 our psalm for today; "We are his people the sheep of his pasture," Psalm 100 and so on. But now Jesus is saying that they are not his sheep because they don't believe in him.

I wonder if all this talk of sheep and shepherds would have reminded them of the things Jesus had said a couple of months previously at the Feast of Tabernacles. Many of his audience would have been around then as well. This is the teaching we have at the beginning of John 10 where Jesus states: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (Jn 10:11). Back then the Jews were divided – they couldn't make up their minds about Jesus – was he a good man sent from God, demon-possessed or raving mad? They can't make up their minds and they are still talking about it.

You see, the implication behind what Jesus is saying is that the current Jewish leaders were failing their people. They were like the shepherds of Ezekiel 34 who were caring only for themselves and not for the flock, whereas Jesus is the one who

goes out searching for his sheep (Ezek 34:11), who will bring them to good pasture where they can find rest (Ezek 34:13-15) and who will provide a place of safety for them (Ezek 34:25,28).

Safety and security are what Jesus promises his followers in today's passage. "My sheep listen to my voice, and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they shall never, ever perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and nobody can snatch them out of my father's hand."

Jesus is promising something amazing. Here they are right next to the temple, the sign of God's presence with his people. They are standing on the site of Solomon's Temple - which was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 587BC; Zerubbabel's Temple - which was desecrated by Antiochus in 167 BC; and the magnificent Temple built by King Herod - which will be destroyed by the Romans a mere 30 or 40 years later in 70AD. What lasts? What can guarantee our safety and security? Not buildings, that's for sure. Instead Jesus points us to a relationship with Jesus and his father, a relationship that John calls eternal life.

In John 17 he says: Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." (Jn 17:3)

But this knowing God is not head knowledge – knowing stuff about God; its life knowledge – knowing and experiencing God at work in our lives.

This brings us to our theme for today:

**Letting God wash, cleanse and feed us: the secret to real life.**

At some time or other all of us will probably ask ourselves the question – what is life really all about? Thoreau once wrote: "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." Or as someone, possibly Mark Twain, put it: "Life is one darn thing after another!" Well, I'm sure we all feel a bit like that at times, but hopefully we can lift our sights a bit higher and ponder this thing that John calls eternal life.

John's Gospel is full of references to eternal life; most famously in John 3:16 where Jesus promises that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. Jesus is asking us to live in the reality of eternal life or, more accurately the life of the age to come. The focus is not on the fact that it goes on for ever, though it does, but that it is a different sort of life. This is how Tom Wright describes it:

"Eternal life is the quality of life, sharing the inner life of Jesus, that is on offer, at once, to anyone who believes. 'Eternal' tells you what *sort* of life it is, as well as the fact that it goes on after death: it is the life of the age to come, the new life which God has always planned to give his world."

And John makes it quite clear that those who believe in Christ, have already begun to live that new quality of life now, though not yet in all its fullness. This sharing of God's life now is not something airy-fairy, a warm fuzzy feeling but more knowing and experiencing God as we encounter him working in and through us.

It is allowing him to wash, cleanse and feed us, and also to experience his presence

with us, and to allow ourselves to be established as a community of witness to the people around us.

Let's look briefly at these before we close.

**He washes us** – we have just sung about being washed in the blood of the Lamb. Usually we think of blood as a stain that it is difficult to remove. How come the saints of Revelation 7 wash their clothes in blood and they come out dazzlingly white?

It's a metaphor, of course. The OT prophets often used the metaphor of polluted garments being washed clean to describe how God washes his people to remove the stain of sin. Ezekiel 36:25 – “I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities.” John himself writes: “Jesus Christ, the Righteous One, [he] is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for us only but also for the sins of the whole world.” 1 Jn 2:2. I am really pleased to belong to a tradition that has Confession as part of its weekly service followed by the absolution – the assurance that our sins are forgiven and the encouragement to forgive ourselves and to be at peace. I can draw near to God because I know that in his great love for me he has sent his Son Jesus to die in my place. My sins are forgiven and I am washed clean through the shed blood of Christ. Hallelujah!

### **He cleanses us**

What do you think is the difference between being washed and being cleansed? In some passages they are more or less the same thing, but there are also places where each has a slightly different emphasis. The Greek word that we translate as cleansed is also the root of our word catharsis/ cathartic. For me this has a sense of healing or purifying or renewing. It suggests to me the inner work of transformation that the Spirit does in us to make us more like Jesus. Once again this is not something we have to do on our own through our own efforts; God is not calling us to try harder! It is something we allow God to do within us.

Those of you who are Narnia fans may remember that in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* there is an obnoxious boy by the name of Eustace. He goes to sleep in a dragon's lair and wakes up as a dragon. No matter how hard he tries to scrape off the dragon skin he cannot do it.. – He has to allow Aslan with his sharp claws to do it – and a painful process it is! Those of us who have been around for a while, know that our Loving God never ceases to remove the layers we have built up inside us that prevent us from becoming the person we were created to be.

### **He feeds us**

Jesus is the bread of life; the one who will provide living water so we will never thirst again. And he calls us to feed on him. What does this mean? Well, we talk about devouring books; drinking it all in, so part of it is about feeding on the written word. This is not only reading for study but also listening to what God might be saying to us; engaging in contemplative reading, meditating on the risen Christ. Some would see the 'hard saying' about eating his flesh and drinking his blood as a reference to the Eucharist where we 'feed on him by faith with thanksgiving.' All of these provide sustenance as the Spirit works through them.

### **We experience his presence**

God is present with us, just as the pillar of cloud and fire were ever-present with the

Israelites on their wilderness journey. Again, it is not so much by our efforts that we strive to come into the presence of God, but that we recognise that his shalom-presence is with us. He is holding us in his hand – in a safe and secure place. As Paul writes: “What can separate us from the love of Christ ... I am convinced that nothing ... in all of creation will be able to separate from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom 8:38-39)

But there's more.

### **He establishes us as a witnessing community**

It is important to recognise this, otherwise all that we have said so far can be seen as being simply for our own well-being and comfort. But just as Israel was called to be a witness to the nations around them, so we, as individuals and as a community of faith, are called to witness to those around us – not only in what we say but in how we live our lives.

### **Challenge**

So, as we think back over what has been said this morning let's take time to reflect on what God has been saying to us.

Are we allowing him to be our good shepherd.?

Are we sure of and rejoicing in our security in God?

Do we experience forgiveness as something we gratefully accept, not something we strive for.

Are we allowing God to work in our lives to cleanse and heal us? Are we listening to his voice even when it's not saying what we want to hear?

Are we allowing him to feed us – and giving him the opportunity to do so? We don't want to be busy to eat properly.

Are we allowing him to be present with us? Once again, are we making time to be in his presence?

Are we listening to his voice as he calls us to follow him – the one who came to serve and to give his life for others?

God has a path for each of us – to know him and to know a life where our unique gifts can be unfurled before the watching world. Our part is to join with him and let him make this possible; to live the life we were created for: real life, eternal life now and yet more fully in the age to come. Amen; let it be so.

I want to finish by encouraging you with a look at what lies ahead for us.

**Rev 7:13-17.**