

Sermon on John 7.14-18, 37-39

“Reading the Bible and sharing our faith with others”

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PRAYER.

My somewhat mysterious instructions for this morning specified the topic of “how to learn from the Bible and share our faith with others”. This is supported by the two readings we have just heard – a few scattered verses from the teaching of Jesus in John 7 together with the story of Philip and the Ethiopian official in Acts 8. I admit this caused me a good deal of head-scratching ... Greater clarity did not begin to prevail until yesterday. It then dawned on me that John chapter 7 provides a very timely example of how Jesus himself invites people to a relationship of faith in a public context that ranges from apathy to outright hostility. There is quite a lot to learn here for our own experience at work or at school or with our friends.

John 7 opens with a scene set in September or early October, perhaps in the year before Jesus died. Many or most religious Jews in Galilee are travelling to Jerusalem for the feast of Sukkot or Tabernacles, one of the three great Temple festivals – possibly the greatest of the pilgrimage and temple festivals in the first century. The beginning of our chapter reports an interesting if somewhat tetchy discussion between Jesus and his brothers, who want him to go to the festival and publicly stake his claim to be the Messiah.

His sceptical family seem to be getting impatient with him. While Jesus is supposedly healing and working miracles in relative obscurity in Galilee, they want him to take a much bigger public stage. If he really wants to maximize his impact, in their view he doesn't have the requisite celebrity status or the number of 'followers' he deserves in the big city down south. His Facebook and Instagram profile just aren't what they should be: as far as they are concerned he isn't getting anywhere nearly enough 'likes'. What better way of putting a big show than at the biggest festival of them all?

Jesus understands their motivation but he also knows that, without even seeking publicity, his life is already in danger from those who find his ministry questioning their structures of ideological or political correctness. He knows that while the world has no problem with his family's conventional lifestyle, it does in fact hate him and what he stands for. He knows that conflict is coming in Jerusalem. He is ready to face that when the time comes, but he doesn't want to provoke it prematurely or unnecessarily. So he decides for the moment to sit out the festival and not to attend in public.

But then he does go up to Jerusalem after all, although incognito and discreetly. Jesus always stands ready to bear witness to the truth; he never avoids it. But he is well aware that in the service of God not all publicity is good publicity. That approach is roughly the opposite of the narcissistic celebrity culture of today!

You might say for Jesus this witness is instead a case of quietness and discretion opening a space for spiritual hospitality and inquiry. By sidestepping a public scene either of

conflict or of celebrity stardom, Jesus creates an opportunity for those who are open-minded to wonder aloud who he is, whether he is a good man or a deceiver.

The festival lasts seven days. Halfway through, after it is well-established, Jesus does go up to the temple to teach, as many others would do. Here verses 14-15 on your pew sheet confirm an impression also attested in the other Gospels: there was clearly something altogether magnetic and captivating about the way Jesus taught – not with great fanfare or bravado, not with great sophistication, and yet in a way that was arrestingly profound and knowledgeable and true.

Jesus is alert to his audience's reaction. And what he says in reply is a wonderful object lesson for the question assigned for us this morning. Scripture and the Temple festivals themselves testify to his coming.

Tabernacles or Sukkot had become the great pilgrim festival of joy. It involved not only living in booths commemorating the Exodus, but as a festival at the end of the harvest and of the long dry season it had also become increasingly associated with God's gift of rain and indeed of water. The prophet Zechariah had spoken of the nations of the world coming to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Tabernacles together. And the highlight of the feast was the great celebration of carrying water from the well at Siloam in order to pour it into a basin by the altar, which some Jewish texts describe as Jerusalem's most joyful ceremony of all. It makes particular sense at the end of the harvest and the long middle Eastern dry season, when there is typically no rain at all from March or April till October.

Skip forward to the end of our reading, and we see Jesus in the temple again on the last day of the Feast to promise that the great joy of the water ceremony finds its fulfilment in him: those who believe in him will receive the living water of the Holy Spirit so they themselves become wells of life for others. And in chapter 8, perhaps still on the last day of the feast, when people lit lanterns to continue festivities all night, Jesus goes on to offer himself as the light of the world.

But back here at the beginning of our reading, when Jesus gets up in the middle of the festival, he speaks about where the true gift of God may be found. He does not assert authority for himself, but speaks on behalf of God who sent him.

Anyone can claim that, of course. How do we know he is really sent from God? Verse 17 at the heart of our passage gives the answer in terms of a gentle invitation and message of persuasion: "Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own."

Jesus effectively invites his audience to an experiment: try it and you'll see for yourself if it's true. Have a go. Go on, try it – you might like it. And more than that, you might find that the way of discipleship fills you with the living water of joy and of encouragement in the deepest desires of your heart.

It's worth contrasting this approach with several quite widespread views one comes across in the church – dare I say it: particularly in the Church of England.

- There are those for whom the task of sharing the faith is just too embarrassing to contemplate; their religion is a private matter and in any case, shouldn't we all

avoid imposing our views on anyone else, etc. etc.? So evangelism and sharing our faith is a nonsense or worse.

- Another group of Christians might say that faith and mission are only about social improvement and there is certainly no need ever to mention Jesus.
- Some cajole people to faith by appealing to their fear of rejection or damnation.
- And others still see the task of sharing their faith as entirely a case of rational debate and evidence about the “claims” of Jesus or his death and resurrection. They may do so on a soap box at Hyde Park Corner or knocking on your front door or rolling out polished apologetic debaters; but fundamentally it’s all about “evidence that demands a verdict”.

None of these views are 100% wrong; all can appeal to an element of truth. But their understanding of the basic assignment differs from that of Jesus in our passage. He clearly asks people to follow him but he does so not by keeping silent, nor by proposing a social or political agenda, nor an argument or a scare tactic. Instead, he says you can discover the true nature of God’s gracious gift through an experiment of stepping onto his path and walking his way.

This principle of John 7.17 was actually of considerable importance many years ago for my own personal path to faith. And I sometimes suspect that it may well be not my books or lectures but this patient, persistent and generous openness that has borne the most fruit in conversations about faith with friends and students.

In the last few decades the marginalization and hostility against Christianity in public life has continued to accelerate, and even small ways of sharing faith can now be considered controversial. In recent times, I have often been reminded of a conversation many years ago with a retired American missionary who had spent several decades in the Middle East. His thoughts about how to share one’s faith in a hostile or sceptical setting were strikingly practical. He advised living the life of discipleship without fear or compromise, while walking alongside other people in friendship – until one day they turn around and ask about the source of our hope and strength, “What sort of gas do you have in your tank?” It is then that the door opens to share the invitation of Jesus. And as Jesus promises in the previous chapter, he refuses no one who comes to him (6.37).

Encouraging people to take a chance on discovering the thirst-quenching gift of God for themselves may be the greatest secret to sharing our faith. Our second reading from Acts 8 shows Philip doing something similar with the Ethiopian official – although by the time Philip gets to him, he has already taken the first step to exploring and opened his heart to the word of God. All that Philip has to do is to make himself available to the Holy Spirit at the right time and place, and to walk alongside this man in his journey of experiment and discovery. Almost before you can say ‘Bob’s your Uncle’ the Ethiopian is quite literally ready to take the plunge!

Jesus answered, "My teaching is not my own. It comes from the one who sent me.

¹⁷ Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.

AMEN.