

## Sermon – 22/03/2009 pm

### Keeping the Feast

Study Text: Nehemiah 8:13-18

Some years ago a student came to me saying that Jesus had visited Kashmir. He said there is a tomb with the name of Jesus on it in Kashmir. Who is this Jesus? The book of Mormon claims that Jesus visited the Americas after his resurrection. Who is this Jesus? Such claims seem ridiculous but how do we answer them? This student was making a good case with support from the writing of 'experts'. In some ways I failed to answer him as I should have. I quoted some Bible verses but did not open my Bible to show him clearly what was written.

It was only later as I was reading Acts 4 that I found the answer I should have given. I had quoted Acts 4:12, a verse making clear that Christ is the only way of salvation. But the verse does not include the name of Christ. What is the name by which we are saved? A few verses earlier it is written 'the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth'. Jesus was from Nazareth not from Kashmir or America. It may seem a simple thing but it always reminds me to open the Bible when people ask me questions. Otherwise I may find myself trusting my reasoning and giving my own opinions.

It is important that we open our Bible and read it, not only when we have to defend the gospel but for our own benefit. Do not rely on what others say. Check what is written. If you want God to guide you through life then you must follow the guidebook he has given you. Many a traveller has got lost because they listen to other people rather than look at the map. Many followers of Christ fail to listen to what God says in the Bible. You must keep this book with you and become familiar with it. You must learn how to read it and how to understand it if you are to follow the directions.

The exiles who had returned to Jerusalem almost 100 years before Nehemiah were keeping the feast of Tabernacles (Ezra 3:4). They were making the prescribed offering each day of this seven day festival. They thought they were doing everything according to the Law of Moses but our passage today indicates this was not so. They were not making booths and living in them during the days of the festival.

### Book

On the first day of the seventh month all the people gathered together to hear Ezra read from the Book of the Law of Moses. They listened attentively and with the help of the Levites understood what was written. They began to weep over their sin but then found strength and joy in the Lord's forgiveness.

On the second day the heads of families, along with Levites and priests, came together for a teaching session led by Ezra. They gathered to read more of God's word and have it explained to them by Ezra. It was not as if this book was suddenly discovered and they were finding completely new teaching. It was just that they had not bothered to read it themselves but relied upon what they heard from others.

In this teaching session the head of families were shown how to study the Bible for themselves so they could go back and teach it to their families. This is what was commanded by Moses in Deuteronomy 6:7. This is what Paul writes about in the matter of gifts. Pastors

and teachers are to equip the saints for the work of ministry (Ephesians 4:12). Ezra could not adequately teach everyone. He equipped the leaders to teach others.

Prior to this time the people were keeping the feast of Tabernacles. Even prior to the exile they were keeping the festivals. They were going to the temple and making burnt offerings. They were following the practices that had been handed down to them. But now, after reading the Book for themselves, they realized they had not been keeping all of God's commands regarding this feast of Tabernacles. They had accepted uncritically what was handed down to them.

Kidner writes "custom, as happens so often in religious history, had overlaid and modified 'the faith once delivered to the saints' so that the freshly studied Scriptures, like a cleaned painting, now revealed some long forgotten colours".

The Protestant Reformation was a time when such a thing happened. All the accretions of the church, traditions built up over hundreds of years, were peeled back to reveal the true gospel, the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone. Tradition had come to hold sway in the teaching and practice of the church. Only priests received instruction from the Bible and this was secondary to instruction in church law and tradition.

The Reformers stand in the line of Ezra in that they opened the Book to read for themselves what is written. They took what was written in the Bible to be authoritative in the church and not subordinate to tradition. Also like Ezra they encouraged heads of families and all believers to read and understand what is written. They proclaimed the priesthood of all believers.

Whilst the Protestant Reformation is prominent in the history of the church there have been many smaller reformations. Churches have found, and continue to find, that traditions tend to enter into church practice. It is imperative for us to keep going back to Scripture to evaluate our practices.

## **Booths**

The feast of Tabernacles had two aspects. It was a harvest festival and also a time to remember the wilderness journey of their ancestors when they were brought out of Egypt. This second aspect was to be remembered by making booths of tree branches and camping in these for the seven days of the festival. But this practice had fallen off the radar, maybe because it was tedious or uncomfortable. Ever since the days of Joshua, this aspect of the feast of Tabernacles had not been observed (8:17).

They found it written in Leviticus 23 that they should go out in to the bush and collect leafy branches from various trees, including palms and olives - the species given here are not exactly the same as those listed in Leviticus. They were to bring these home and erect booths on their roofs, or in the open spaces of the city. They were to live in these for the seven days of the feast. So after finding this written they acted immediately to announce this practice in their cities (8:15).

Imagine the excitement, especially among the children. This was a time of great gladness (8:17) - not only because of the harvest but also this celebration to remember the Exodus. In the excitement the children would have asked 'why are we doing this' and 'what does it mean'. The adults would then have explained to them how the Lord had brought his people –

that is their forefathers – out of bondage in Egypt and into the Promised Land where they now lived.

Should we be keeping this festival today? It would certainly be a shock to see people living in leafy tents on their roof or on the front lawn. No - we do not keep this festival because in Jesus Christ we have the fulfilment of the Exodus. In Jesus we have one who is greater than Moses, one who delivers God's chosen people from bondage to sin.

But we still have a festival. We have the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. In this we gather to remember the death of Jesus Christ and his resurrection. We partake of the bread and the wine that has been set apart for this holy purpose. The bread reminds us of the body of Jesus nailed to the Cross and the wine of the blood of the sacrifice, Jesus own blood that cleanses us from sin.

As children see us partaking of this sacrament they will ask what it means. Are you able to tell them what it means? Outsiders will ask what it means and why we keep this 'strange ritual' and we will tell them. In India some people think that to become a Christian you have to eat meat because that is what Christians eat at the Lord's Supper.

Baptism and the Lord's Supper are the only two festivals or sacraments prescribed in the New Testament. Are you ready to explain the meaning of these? If you start keeping other festivals like Christmas and Easter you will have difficulty explain their meaning. Keep well clear of the confusion that comes from Santa Claus and Easter bunnies laying eggs.

## **Blessing**

Ezra led in covenant renewal, in reformation of life and worship in the community of God's people. He did this by opening and reading the Book of the Law of God, the book we know as the Bible. 'The move to make Scripture the guiding principle of Jewish life was powerfully initiated' writes Kidner. Ezra kept reading this Book during the seven days of the festival.

According to this Book it was to be read completely every seven years, in the year of release, during the feast of Tabernacles (Deuteronomy 31:9-11). We are not told if this was a year of release but Ezra was reading it anyway. The festival ended with a great assembly, a holy convocation on the eight day.

This was time of great gladness in Israel. The walls of the city had been rebuilt and the people could now worship without disturbance from their enemies. With God's word being open and read they could now worship God according to the manner he had ordained. These people knew they were greatly blessed by the Lord their God.

All who listen to God's word and obey it will be greatly blessed. *Blessed is the one who hears the words of this prophecy and keeps those things written in it; for the time is near* (Revelation 1:3). On the last page of the Bible we are warned not to add to or take away from what is written in this book.

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