

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: St John Chapter 7: Some Notes

Some oddities here, as well as some powerful teaching. As to the oddities: 1) If you accept that Jesus had siblings, the “brothers” are just that, and seem to be saying that if Brother Jesus is determined to pretend to be a super prophet, he had better go for it in Jerusalem, rather than in a Galilean backwater. They really are not looking to Jesus’ best interests, or backing him. His response is blunt but accurate: nobody will be bothered whether the brothers attend the Feast of Tabernacles or not; but he, Jesus, will be noticed... and he is going to choose his own time. On this occasion, the Greek isn’t referring to the God-appointed time (Jesus’ usual term for “my time is not yet come”), but “the opportune time”. Jesus wants to hit festival peak time.

2) There is an oddity/mystery inasmuch as a chunk of Chapter 7 seems to have been misplaced from the earlier chapter about the healing by the pool. 3) The water references are less puzzling if you remember that pouring water was an important part of the Feast of Tabernacles; and the eating flesh/drinking blood references are less examples of trying to shock the Jews if you remember that the various mystery religions of the time believed in taking God into yourself and taking yourself into God – and the idea of absorbing God/ being filled by God isn’t wholly alien to the Jewish faith.

We hear about eating and drinking, and very naturally think Eucharist. William Barclay, steeped in the Presbyterian tradition, points out that John doesn’t give us a Last Supper institution of the Eucharist, but in effect dwells on the presence of Christ in every meal shared by believers. He makes a very powerful case for recognising the huge difference between Jesus’ rather snobby critics, who wanted a Messiah with the right credentials (one of them in effect), and Jesus’ insistence on the holiness/divinity of the very ordinary.

Another learning point in this chapter is Christianity as a lived faith. It is quite interesting to discuss Christology at length, as some of Jesus’ contemporaries discussed Nazareth and Bethlehem and the Messiah in a sense coming from nowhere; but our calling is to live in relationship with Christ rather than to invest our energy in trying to find the right words to describe him. As we get to know him better, we’ll get just a little better at being able to understand him and to talk about him.

You can sympathise with Nicodemus, but we are called to say a good word for Jesus (“Stand up, stand up, for Jesus”), and to live for him, with him, and in him.