

Psalm 81

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[0 : 00] You might look especially at the words in verse 8, Hear, O my people, hear, O my people. Now we're gathered here today on the first Sunday, first Lord's Day of 2007. And New Year's Day is not too far behind us to allow us to forget that at New Year normally people make resolutions. I think all of us are aware that resolutions are relatively easy to make and much more difficult to keep. Making the resolution is one thing, maintaining the resolve is another. Now the New Year is celebrated universally, although not always at the same time. The Chinese New Year, for example, comes up normally in January or February. This year it would be in February.

The Jewish New Year is in September or October. But the passage of one year to another does tend to be universally celebrated.

[1 : 14] Now the Jews, as I've said, celebrate the New Year in September or October. The feast, which is today called the New Year Festival, in the Bible is called the Feast of Trumpets.

And it takes place in September or thereabouts, normally in September. And on the first of the month, not our calendar month, but in the Jewish calendar month, the Feast of Trumpets was and is celebrated.

And this was the beginning of a cycle, a three to four week cycle of festivity in ancient Israel. It led to the Day of Atonement in the 10th of the month in the Festival of Tabernacles on the 15th. And the Festival of Tabernacles, in fact, lasted for a week.

That's the 15th plus seven days, eight days in all. That was a huge event, a huge event in the life and in the history of the people of God under the Old Covenant.

[2 : 31] And the Feast of Tabernacles was the culmination of the festivities that began with the celebration of the New Year on the first of the month.

And it was one of these great events. There were three great such events in the people of Israel. There was the Passover in the spring. There was Pentecost for weeks in early summer. And there was the New Year and the Day of Atonement and the Tabernacles in the autumn. Now, the Festival of Tabernacles is alluded to in this time.

Because we have a reference to the new moon, which would have been the Feast of Trumpets, a reference to the full moon, which would have been the Festival of Tabernacles.

And this time would have been sung almost certainly during the Festival of Tabernacles. It was a big, big event.

[3 : 31] And it's important, I think, that we envisage it. It wasn't just a small group of people gathering in a synagogue somewhere. It was a huge number of people thronging the streets of Jerusalem.

It could be like the Hogné party in Prince's Street in Edinburgh that didn't take place this year, that where the streets are just packed with people. Or if you ever remember during the festival, you go down the Royal Mile, you have to fight your way through the crowds.

It's that kind of celebration where there's lots and lots of people gathered together. A great deal of excitement.

And in fact, the Roman garrisons in the time of Jesus were always very nervous during these great festival periods, lest there would be some kind of revolution.

It was a time when anything could happen, they felt. But the Festival of Tabernacles itself was a time of rejoicing, of remembering, and of resolving.

[4 : 32] It's a time of rejoicing, as obvious from the opening verses of the psalm, which speak about singing and shouting and playing a multiplicity of instruments.

It was a time of remembrance when the people remembered how God had delivered them from the bondage and slavery of Egypt. And we see a reference to that in verse 5. But it was, above all, a time of resolution.

A time when the people renewed their commitment to the Lord. And that's why there's such a strong emphasis in this psalm on hearing what God has to say.

Because we hear what God has to say in order that we might respond to him. There are three references to hearing or listening in this psalm. The tragedy, of course, was, as the psalmist said, that so often the people of God refuse to listen.

They refuse to respond. They refuse to hear what God was saying to them. And there was a sense in which they were being called upon to make a new year resolution.

[5 : 38] To renew their commitment to the Lord. I wonder how many of us take advantage of a new year. To renew our commitment to the Lord.

The Lord has graciously granted us another, to see another year. Ought we not, in gratitude to him, renew our commitment to him. Ought we not to recognise that the most important resolution that we can take is to be willing to hear what he is to say to us.

To listen to his word. And to follow his guidance. Hearing is tremendously important. The people of Israel in the Old Testament, the church in the Old Testament, is an acoustic community.

It lives by the word of God. It is as we hear the word of God that we are able, enabled to do the will of God and to bring glory to God's name.

You know the well-known words from Deuteronomy. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

[6 : 47] That still is the fundamental credo of the Jewish people. And so today I understand every synagogue service begins with the repetition of these words which are known as the Shema coming from the Hebrew for here.

And these words were confirmed by Jesus as constituting the most important commandment of all. You remember someone came, one of the teachers of the law came and asked him which is the greatest commandment.

Jesus quoted this one about hearing the Lord. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one. This, say Jesus, is the most important thing.

Yes, we are to love God, we are to love him and to love our neighbour, but we do that in response to hearing what God is to say to us, listening to his word. We are called to be acoustic people, to listen, to have good hearing.

Jesus said to his disciples, take heed how you hear, because you recognise how crucially important a hearing is. The problem, of course, with Israel, as reflected in the psalm, the problem that Jesus confronted and the problem that we face today is not a problem of deafness, so much as a problem of disobedience.

[8 : 07] That we do hear and yet we don't hear. We hear and yet we don't listen. And we're being challenged today in the first Sunday of the new year to make a commitment to hear what God is to say to us today and throughout all the days of this year in order that we might be responding to his command, respond to his word.

And so God is saying to us, listen to me. There are many voices. There are more voices today brought to us around the world than in any other time in history.

We're living in an explosion of media. There are multiple millions of voices. But God is saying to us at the beginning of this year, the most important voice of all is in my word.

It's my voice. Listen to me. Do you remember what Jesus said to the three disciples who accompanied Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration? As Jesus was transfigured before them, the voice from heaven said, this is my son.

Listen to him. And so God is saying, listen to me. And he's also saying, listen to Jesus. Jesus has come as the revelation of who God is.

[9 : 31] He has come with God's message for you and for me. It's interesting that Peter wanted to build three tabernacles and it may be that I referenced in some allusion to the festival of tabernacles when the people temporarily lived in tents of the tabernacles, referring back to the period of 40 years in the wilderness and reflecting gratitude for God's deliverance and guidance during that time.

Now we read in John's gospel that Jesus went and visited one of the festivals of tabernacles during his ministry.

He probably visited more. That festival of tabernacles which is alluded to in John's gospel in chapter 7 verse 10 and chapter 10 verse 42 is a key section of John's gospel and it probably was the festival of tabernacles that was celebrated in September six months before Jesus died in the spring of the following year.

So it was Jesus' last visit to the festival of tabernacles. We notice in John's gospel that in fact Jesus went to several of the festivals and there's a sense in which John's gospel not only hangs on the seven great signs and miracles but also on the festivals that he attended.

That's for another day. But the point I want to emphasize here is what Jesus said at this particular celebration of the festival of tabernacles.

[11 : 19] We see Jesus teaching and we also see Jesus in dialogue. I mean Jesus when he taught wasn't as people say today six feet above contradiction.

Jesus welcomes questions. Jesus would respond to an argument where people we would today would call it heckling and probably if anyone tried it in the church service it would be quickly marched out.

But Jesus did that and we see him responding to what the crowd said to what his disciples said to kind of a dialogue here.

Sometimes what Jesus says in these chapters is called discourses but not so much a discourse as a dialogue but certainly there's a great deal of teaching there that there's two way communication means.

That's a message for us in the church there today. Some commentators call this particular incident during that week or half week when Jesus taught in the temple during the festival of the tabernacle they call it the great controversy because you've got the enemies of Jesus coming and verbally attacking him and making all sort of wild accusations against him.

[12 : 43] And so when God says to us listen to him let's listen to Jesus here we have a good example of the kind of things that Jesus is saying to us the kind of things that we ought to listen to the kind of things that we ought to heed.

And in the interaction with the crowd and with his disciples Jesus gives us two reasons why we should hear what he has to say to us.

First of all the first reason is because of who he is and the second reason is because of what he offers. First of all because of who Jesus is.

You see this particularly in the verse 29 of the 7th chapter of John's Gospel. Let me read that verse again to you where Jesus says I know him that is God but I come from him and he sent me.

He says my teaching in Father Daniel he says my teaching is not my own it comes from him who sent me. And so Jesus has this unique authority humanity in that he comes from God.

[14 : 06] He comes from God in a unique sense. He comes to us and he presents to us his message as the word literal word of God. He is from God.

He is the son of God. He is in fact God himself. And it is Jesus who really tells us what God is like. He is not simply God's representative but he is God in person who has come to us.

And that's why we need to hear what he is saying to us. That's why we need to heed what he is to say to us. And it's important for us to recognize that Jesus stands head and shoulder above every other authority every other teacher because he comes from God.

He is the son of God. He is the one who has got a unique authority. You remember how he says in the sermon on the mount you've heard it said of old and what the authorities have said that I say unto you.

And he repeats that several times that I say to you. No contemporary rabbi of his day would speak that way. He's presenting a unique claim here and he claims to be the son of God.

[15 : 23] He is God in kind. And it's tremendously important for us to recognize that today. That Jesus is absolutely unique. Jesus is not simply one voice, one religious voice, one religious authority among many.

Jesus claims to be unique. Jesus claims to be of a different nature from all of the others. He is the son of God and he comes to us with this unique authority.

And that's why we should listen to him because he speaks to us from God. But then we also have to listen to him because of what he offers.

Now let's look at this in more detail. In this dialogue that Jesus had with the people in the temple and the festival of tabernacles Jesus offered three things.

And these are well-known features of the gospel. But I want to emphasize them again today. First of all he offers life. We see this in chapter 7 at verse 37.

[16:36] Let me read that verse to you. On the last and greatest day of the feast Jesus stood and said in a loud voice let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me as the scripture has said will have streams of living of running water flowing from within.

So Jesus is offering life new life. The festival of tabernacles celebrated the wilderness years and give God thanks for the way in which he granted his people safe passage through the wilderness. And during these years God provided water in the desert from the rock. And water becomes an important symbol or image in the theology of the Old Testament and here in the teaching of Jesus. The prophet Zechariah had prophesied of living waters flowing out of Jerusalem. And Ezekiel in his famous vision of the new temple saw a river with ever widening an ever greater flow coming from the rock underneath the altar of the temple.

And it seems that this festival, the festival of tabernacles was a festival in which water played a significant part.

[18:04] And the various commentators have built up the picture from authorities like Josephus, the Jewish historian, and others who describe what happened during these festivals.

And just let me quote here from what one authority says. On each of the seven days of the feast of tabernacles, the people went in procession from the temple down to the fountain which supplied the pool of Siloam, where the priest filled a golden vase from the running water.

And the choir sang from the twelfth chapter of Isaiah. They carried the vase back to the temple through the water gate, proceeded round the altar singing prayers from the end of the 118th psalm. Then they poured the water over the altar. They did that apparently for seven days. But on the eighth day, there was no water ceremony.

It was a day of waiting, the last day of the feast. The crowd gathered in the temple courts, and there was silence. The worshippers then prayed that the great day that Zechariah and Ezekiel had anticipated would miraculously be fulfilled before their eyes by a fountain of running water bursting open in the heart of the temple courts.

[19:28] And it was during that phase of silence that the people were there waiting in anticipation for a miracle to happen that Jesus stood up and said in a loud voice so that all could hear these words about living water.

Whoever is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the scripture has said, will have streams of living water flowing from within.

And this offer of life is an offer that Jesus is still making today. A very different world from the world of the Jews in the first century.

But we live in a world where people are still thirsting, where people are still looking for life. Sadly and tragically, so often they look in the wrong places.

Authorities in our own society are becoming concerned about the growth in drug addiction, in binge drinking, gambling, recreational sex.

[20:38] All of these symptoms of a hunger and thirst for new life. But of course that's not life.

This has brought home to me recently reading an excerpt from a new book which has just been published called The Gospel According to the Beatles which outlines the spiritual history of John Lennon.

Some of you may know that David Patterson, when he was minister of the Free Church in Rora, had quite a long talk with John Lennon about the gospel and presented the gospel to him very clearly when he was in hospital as a result of a car accident in Galstray.

And in fact, David left with a copy of John Scott's book, Basic Christianity. According to this book, which reveals, I understand, information which had not been known, I don't think there's any reference to David Patterson within it, but it does refer to a year or two later, I think it was 1969, that David met John Lennon in Galstray, that in the 70s, this book tells us that Lennon became very interested in Christianity, and he enjoyed watching some of America's best-known evangelists on television, like Billy Gray and Oral Roberts.

And this book details some of the letters he wrote to Oral Roberts, who was a Pentecostal evangelist in America. And he wrote a desperate letter to Oral Roberts confessing his dependence on drugs and the fear of facing up to the problems of life.

[22 : 22] This is a quote from this letter, explain to me what Christianity can do for me. Is it phony? Can he love me? I want out of hell.

Now there was a man who was still an icon, who was still a legend, and who was a model in which a lot of people still face their lives. They said what he thought was life was in fact hell.

And it's so important for us to hear the word of Jesus today to keep it right concerning the meaning of life and what is true life.

True life is to be found in Jesus because God has made us in such a way that there is a Jesus shaped space in our lives that only he can fill.

Drugs and alcohol and whatever else cannot fill that gap. Only he can do it. And he offers that life today.

[23 : 26] He offers that life to you and to me. And that's why we need to listen to him because he offers life, eternal life. But Jesus also offers light.

We see that in John's gospel, the following chapter, verse 8, where we read, when Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, I am the light of the world.

Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. Now, according to these ancient authorities, the festival of Cabernacles was also a festival of light.

It was a festival known as a festival of water and light. Although these references are not called such in the scriptures. Let me again quote from one of the authorities that I have been looking at.

Alongside the celebration involving the drawing of water, there was also a feast of lights during Tabernacles week. It involved the lighting of the golden candles taken in the court of the women in the temple.

[24 : 32] The Jews thus remembered that during their wanderings in the wilderness, there was the marvelous pillar of fire to lead them, as well as the marvelous flow of water to refresh them.

And so Jesus comes to us as light, as light to show the way. He comes to us as the pillar of fire came to the people of Israel in the wilderness.

The pillar of fire led them. It's when the pillar of fire moved, they moved. And Jesus comes to us in our lostness, Jesus comes to us in our darkness, Jesus comes to us in our need, and he offers to be light.

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me, just as the people followed the pillar of fire in the wilderness, whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

And so Jesus comes to us in our lostness, and he offers us light. We live in a society where the image of the nomad has become one of the most frequently quoted in much of the sociological and philosophical literature of today.

[25 : 59] People feel that they're simply going from oasis to oasis. There's no point, no purpose, there's no final destination. there's a sense in which they're going round in circles.

Life has become specific rather than linear. And in this situation Jesus comes to us and he says, I am the light of the world. He who follows me will never walk in darkness.

And he comes and he offers light to us in our darkness, light to us in our lostness. He comes to us in our sense of homelessness and he invites us to follow him to an eternal home.

He comes today as the light of the world. So he offers not only life, he also offers light. And that's the second reason, the second offer that he makes to us and makes it so important for us to hear what he is to say to us.

But then thirdly he offers, he also offers freedom, as we see in this dialogue that he had with the people during that half week of ministry in the temple in Jerusalem.

[27 : 14] If we go further on into chapter 8, verse 35 in John's Gospel, we read these words, So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

Earlier he had said, If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples, then you will know the truth. And the truth will set you free. The festival of tabernacles, as I've already said, was a celebration of deliverance from the slavery of Egypt.

But what Jesus is saying here to the people, and what he is saying to us, is that there is a much deeper slavery than the slavery of Egypt. There is a much deeper slavery than whatever other slavery there may exist in history, or in the contemporary world.

That basic slavery is the slavery to sin. And in fact he refers to that in verse 34 of chapter 8. I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.

Everyone who sins is a slave to sin. And that's one of the big problems that we face, that we are slaves to sin.

[28 : 32] And we need to be delivered, we need to be set free. We need the freedom with which Jesus Christ comes and offers us freedom. There's a lot of interest today in what is called the New Age.

And the motivation behind the New Age is the search for freedom. Freedom in oneself. Freedom for the self. In their terms, freedom for the self from the victimization, the manipulation of the ego. Get past the ego to the self, they say, and you will find harmony and you will find harmony in alignment with the universe. But again, there's a lot of interest in the Gnostic Gospels. We know from the Da Vinci Code, the interest in the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Judas, the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of Mary. Tremendous fascination with these things today. Now, both the New Age and we might call the new Gnosticism is an attempt, or our intent, to escape from an evil world by turning inward.

[29 : 44] Essentially the New Age is the world is still evil, I look for goodness in my self. That's why the Gnostic Gospels were written. It was a reaction against evil, and it was a search within the self.

But the Bible tells us that the self is fallen, the self is fractured, the self is fallible, the self is sinful, the self is the slave of sin. And so, these are cul-de-sacs.

They do not present an answer to the problem. The bondage of slavery simply gets worse. It simply increases. Jesus comes to us, and he offers us freedom.

If the Son sets you free, you will be free. Indeed. So, many people today are seeking that freedom, but seeking it in an area within themselves, for freedom is not to be found.

Basic slavery is slavery to sin, and the root of sin is in the self. Out of the heart of man, says Jesus, proceeds evil thoughts and all kinds of sins.

[31 : 06] But the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is the power of God. and to salvation. And so, Jesus offers freedom. He offers life.

He offers light. And he offers freedom. We need his word. Man shall not live, he told the devil in the wilderness, by bread only, but by every word that proceeds, it comes from the mouth of God.

Now, Jesus is there quoting from the book of Deuteronomy, quoting from a passage which is found fairly near, a passage that was already quoted.

And he is reminding us that we need his word, we need to hear his word, we are to live listening to his word and obeying his word. We are shaped in such a way, constitutionally, the way God has made us to live in response to the word of God.

This is our spiritual DNA, if you like. God is saying, listen to me. He is saying concerning Jesus, listen to him.

[32 : 15] So the question we need to ask ourselves is how are we responding? It is fascinating that in the language in which the Gospel of John is written and the New Testament is written in the Greek language, the word to obey and to disobey, the word to obey and disobey are in fact compounds of the word to hear.

It is the Greek word to hear with a prefix before it. To obey literally means to hear submissively. To disobey means to hear dismissively.

So the question when Jesus says to us, Jesus, to you and to you this morning, take heed how you hear it. We need to ask ourselves, are we hearing submissively or dismissively?

Are we hearing and submitting our lives to what we hear and to the Lordship of Jesus himself? Are we simply putting it aside? And say we don't want this or we'll leave it until a moment for a little bit more time.

That's the question we need to ask ourselves at the beginning of this year. How do we hear? Are we hearing submissively or are we hearing dismissively?

[33 : 29] In the earlier chapter, John chapter 6 of John's Gospel, towards the end of the chapter, there's a paragraph heading which says many disciples, at least in the NIV Bible, many disciples desert Jesus.

And we read there in verse 66 of that chapter, from this time many of Jesus' disciples come back and no longer followed him. You see, Jesus was under attack.

And some of these people give up. Peer pressure was too strong. They wanted to be well thought of by the crowd.

And is there not a parallel with so much of what happens today? People want to be well thought of. They want to stand out as Christians in a secular society.

And that is the reason why many people are turning back today. Jesus is saying to us if we're turning back, he wants us to hear and to turn to him, rather than turn away from him.

[34 : 41] We finish by coming back to the story of John Lennon. He, in many ways, well not in many ways, but in every way, was a modern counterpart of those who turned back.

See, following his connections, the witness that David Patterson made to him, his correspondence, old Robert, he told his friends that he'd become a Christian. In fact, he described himself as a born-again Christian.

It wasn't publicly known, it's only coming out now, I understand. According to the book in the spring of 1977, when he was watching the US television premiere of the film Jesus of Nazareth by Franco Zecherelli, he said he became a Christian.

And over the following months he surprised those who were close to him by constantly praising the Lord and writing songs like Talking with Jesus and Amen, which the Lord's Prayer sets in music, and witnessing to non-believers.

But the change in his life deeply perturbed his wife, Yoko, who was very deep into the occult. and she really did her best to persuade him to renege, to go back on his profession of faith.

[36 : 01] She felt that she could no longer control him, and that the occultists to whom she resorted would not be able to control him. And so she, with an unholy passion, attacked his faith, and eventually broke it.

So that he turned back to drugs, and the occult. And he became more enslaved than he'd ever been before. So much so that he couldn't move without consulting a turret, a turret reader, an astrologer.

He couldn't travel anywhere without the advice of a directionist. He couldn't reveal to anyone without knowing the star sign. He couldn't make plans for the future without consulting the I Ching, the ancient Chinese philosophy.

And in 1979, two years later, he announced that he had become a born-again pagan. He turned back, and the slavery became greater than ever before.

God. Now surely, that is a warning to all of us, of the importance of hearing and heeding what Jesus is saying to us.

[37 : 26] It's now too late for John Lennon, sadly and tragically, but it's not too late for you, it's not too late for me. And when Jesus turned to his disciples as the crowds were deserting him, he said to them, will you also go away?

I'm actually saying that to you and to me this morning. And I hope that your response and my response will be the response of Peter on behalf of his disciples.

Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and we know that you are the Holy One of God.

God. And what better resolve to make it the first Sunday of a new year than to reaffirm these words of Peter who reaffirms his allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ and says, to whom shall we go?

Whom can we go? You alone have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.

[38 : 38] May God grant that may be your response and my response this morning and that throughout this year we might hear the word of God, hear the word of Jesus and hear it submissively rather than dismissively.

Let us pray.