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Session 6 - The Light of the World

Bible Passages:

- John 8:1-59

Brief Notes:

This passage continues on from the previous study: the setting is still the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem, and the dominant tone is controversy. The discussion between Jesus and the Jews degenerates into personal abuse (v.48) and the threat of physical violence (v.59). It might well not seem to be the kind of passage we would ideally choose for our groups – we would probably prefer something more encouraging and comforting – but through this fractious dispute John is helping us see Christ for who he is, and at the same time he helps us see ourselves as we all are without him (ie John shows us not just that Jesus is the Light, but also the darkness we are all in). And it is helpful for us to be reminded from the crowd's reaction to Jesus, the kind of reaction we can expect as we follow him (cf. John 15:18-21).

It is another long passage, which again necessitates focussing on the main themes and not getting bogged down in the detail.

12-29 : The Light and the darkness

The bold claim in verse 12 would have had particular resonance in the context of the Feast, when

a huge lamp would be lit, representing the fiery-cloudy pillar in the wilderness. (It must have been huge: I gather it would consume over 4 gallons of oil each day and the wicks were as thick as a man's thigh). As that lamp was extinguished (since according to 7:37 the feast was ending/ended now), Jesus announces that he is the true fulfilment of what that light represented. The verse sets up what are to be key themes in the passage – Jesus' divine identity, the darkness that people are in without him, and the need to follow him, holding to his teaching (cf. v.31)

It is a huge claim but the Pharisees see it as empty talk. They judge him on their own terms (“by human standards”) which only shows their ignorance of who he truly is. He is not merely human, he is heavenly (that's where he is from and where he is going) which means he is able to make such a claim. His Father is the corroborating witness, but they are as ignorant of Him as they are of Jesus. But the darkness they are in is not simply one of ignorance. Jesus has often spoken of the life that he offers, here (vv.21,24) he speaks of the alternative: to die in sin. This darkness they are in, unable to recognise the Light, won't be lifted until Jesus has been lifted up – a reference to his crucifixion (see for example John 3:14).

30-47 : Sons of Abraham?

Verse 28 should have cautioned us against reading too much into the fact that “many believed in him” (v.30), but as Jesus addresses this group in vv.31ff it is clear they are not yet true disciples. Instead of light and darkness, the imagery now is freedom and slavery. They don't acknowledge that they are enslaved and in need of liberation, trusting in their pedigree as sons of Abraham. But their murderous attitude towards Jesus and refusal to accept the truth reveals their true pedigree: their father is the devil. Unlike them Jesus has never sinned (v.46) so is not a slave like them; he is the Son and able therefore to set them free, if they would but truly believe him and follow him.

48-59 : The Son of God

Jesus has said they are not true sons of Abraham but rather sons of the devil, now they throw that charge back at him, calling him a Samaritan and demon-possessed. “Who do you think you are” they say, to which he replies that the important thing is who his Father thinks he is, but they do not know Him. Abraham on the other hand, the one they revered, “rejoiced at seeing my day”. That provokes an incredulous response to which Jesus replies with a clearly understood claim to be God. They had scoffed at his claim that those who follow him would “never see death”, but as the eternal God he could make such a claim.

Discussion Questions:

I don't think it is easy to know how best to lead studies in these long passages, but rather than try

to follow the narrative, such as there is, I might be tempted to use four leading questions, with follow-up questions that tease out the truths and help us apply them.

What does Jesus teach here about himself?

The Light of the World

- What does he mean in claiming to be “the light of the world”?
- Big lights featured in the Feast of Tabernacles, reminding the people of the fiery-cloudy pillar in the wilderness. If Jesus’ claim is linked to that, what is he suggesting?

From above, not of this world

- Where do we see that? How is it significant?

The Son of the Father

- How does he point to his unique relationship to the Father?

The “I AM”

- What is the response of the crowds as Jesus is clearer about who he is?

What does Jesus teach here about the crowd?

- *In darkness* - What does that mean?
- *Facing the prospect of dying in their sin* - What does that mean?
- *Slaves to sin* - What does that mean?
- *Children of the devil* - What does that mean?
- This describes what we once were. Do you recognize that of yourself? How does that make you feel?
- How do you feel when you remember that this describes your non-Christian friends?

What does Jesus offer?

Light

- What does it mean to “never walk in darkness”?

Life

- What is “the light of life”? What does it mean that we have it?

Freedom

- What does it mean to be “free indeed”? In what sense? Freedom from what?

What does Jesus require from us?

Follow him

- How does the rest of the passage fill out what it means to follow him? [ie next two]

Believe in him

- What is the event that will make clear who he is?

Hold to his teaching

- Many apparently believed in him (v.29), but weren't really disciples. Why not?
- How might the hardness of heart and opposition Jesus faced be a helpful lesson to us?
- What other particular lessons will you take from this passage?

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