

**ACT IV : JESUS, THE LIFE-GIVING
LIGHT OF THE WORLD**

JOHN 7:1 – 8:59

Act IV Scene 1. Jesus goes to the festival of Booths

John 7:1 - 8:59 forms a new section, composed of a series of confrontations between Jesus and his enemies which challenge the reader to decide in favour of Jesus. John set the previous section in the context of the feast of Passover. He now moves to a Christian reflection on the themes of the 'Jewish feast of Booths' (also called 'Tabernacles'). Along with Passover and Pentecost, this was one of the three occasions when people were expected to make a pilgrimage to the sanctuary and offer sacrifice (see Exodus 23:16).

It was originally called the 'Ingathering' because the first fruits were gathered in and offered to God. Later it was called the feast of Booths after the makeshift structures erected in the fields for the fruit-gathering. The feast began on the fifteenth day (the day of the full moon) of the autumn month of Tishri (Leviticus 23:39). In the pre-exilic monarchic calendar the New Year was celebrated at Passover, in the spring. However, the returning exiles brought back with them the Babylonian practice of celebrating the New Year in the autumn. This brought together the festival of Booths and the New Year. At the time of Jesus this festival was the high-point of the New Year celebrations. The last and greatest day of the festival (see John 7:37) was called the day of rejoicing in the Torah.

Because of the New Year, the synagogue readings for the feast focus on creation and hence on the themes of light and water - themes found also in John chapters seven and eight. Prayers for rain accompanied a procession to the pool of Siloam where 'living water' was collected while Ezekiel chapter forty-seven was read, which tells of water flowing from the right side of the temple. Zechariah also was read: 'On that day a fountain shall be opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity' (Zechariah 13:1; also 14:1-21). They also chanted the refrain from Isaiah: 'With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation' (Isaiah 12:3).

The women's court of the Temple was illuminated for dancing and festivity. Another New Year theme was God's choice of Israel as God's nation. Readings were chosen from Joshua (1:1-18) and Deuteronomy (31:10-13). The liturgy recalled God's gift of the promised land and the obligation of the people to observe the Law (see John 8:32 and 8:38). The dedication of Solomon's temple was also recalled with readings from 1 Kings 8:54-66 and Exodus 33:12 - 34:26 (see John 7:14 and 8:20). John will develop all these themes in chapters seven and eight, in this way continuing his presentation of Jesus as the fulfilment of the spirituality of Judaism.

The feast came as a climax to a fortnight of significant celebrations. The New Year was ushered in by the new moon on the first day of Tishri, the Rosh Hashanah. This was a day of special solemnity (see Leviticus 23:24 and Numbers 29:1), and was followed by ten days of repentance: days of fasting, prayer and almsgiving. The readings, including Hosea 14 and Joel 2:15-17, focus on our solidarity in sin and the cry to God for communal forgiveness.

The tenth day of Tishri is the Day of Atonement ('Yom Kippur'; see Leviticus 16:29-34; 23:27; Numbers 29:7). It is a day of fasting. The high priest on this one occasion during the year enters into the inner sanctuary of the temple bringing the sins of the people into contact with the mercy-seat of God. Nothing impure can contact the Holy One, and so the sins vanish in the presence of divine mercy. These forgiven sins are then placed on the head of the scapegoat which is driven into the desert to die (Leviticus 16:20ff).

On this day the Book of Jonah is read, reminding all of the universal scope of God's mercy and of Israel's universal mission, and the temple gates are closed to the cry of the most central of all Jewish prayers, the Shema:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

– Deuteronomy 6:4-9

It is against the background of these High Days of Jewish ritual festivity that we are to read these reflections of John. So often in our religious festivities we are blinded by the dazzling but superficial light of ceremony. John wants to open our eyes to the invisible. He invites us, therefore, to contemplate Jesus in the context of community festivities in order to show us that true religion consists in communion with God, a communion lived perfectly by Jesus and into which Jesus invites us all.

John is calling his own community to repentance, to decide for Jesus before it is too late. Jesus, and not the Law, is the source of 'living water'(7:38). He and not the temple (lit up for the festival) is the 'light of the world'(8:12). In Jesus God is making all things new. He is the new creation. In him God is fulfilling his promise to make a new covenant with the people. Jesus is the new temple. He is taking away the sins of the world. In him has come the reign of God's love.

¹After this Jesus went about in Galilee. He did not wish to go about in Judea because the Jews were looking for an opportunity to kill him.

²Now the Jewish festival of Booths was near.

³So his brothers said to him, 'Leave here and go to Judea so that your disciples also may see the works you are doing; ⁴for no one who wants to be widely known acts in secret. If you do these things, show yourself to the world.'

⁵(For not even his brothers believed in him.)

⁶Jesus said to them, 'My time has not yet come, but your time is always here.

⁷The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify against it that its works are evil.

⁸Go to the festival yourselves. I am not going to this festival, for my time has not yet fully come.'

There is tension in the scene from the opening words. John has just spoken of the coming betrayal of Jesus by Judas (6:71). Now he reminds us that the Jewish authorities are out to kill Jesus (see 5:16,18). The menace of death is present throughout this whole section.

Last time we heard of Jesus' brothers was just after the wedding at Cana (2:12). Here we learn that they are tempting him to seek worldly glory, a glory which will no doubt reflect on them. Even members of Jesus' family do not believe in him (compare Mark 3:21, 6:4).

The discussion about 'going (going *up*) to the festival' is another example of John's use of words which have a superficial meaning that is picked up by those to whom Jesus is speaking and a deeper meaning intended by Jesus. His brothers want Jesus to go up to the feast. Jesus says that he is not 'going up' because the providential moment has not come yet. That will happen later when his 'hour' has come. Furthermore, it will be at another festival (the Passover) not *this* one.

Then, lifted up on the cross, he will 'go up' in the sense that he will ascend to heaven and return to the bosom of his Father (see 20:17). Then, and only then, will his disciples see 'the works' which he is doing. Indeed, then the whole world will see. Jesus does in fact go up to Jerusalem for the festival, but he does not 'go up' in the deeper sense.

A deeply tragic note is struck when for the first time Jesus speaks of the hatred which the world has for him – a hatred experienced also by John's community (see 1John 3:13). This is the world that owes its very existence to him, yet did not know him (1:10). This is the world whose sin he has come to take away (1:29), the world he was sent to save (3:17; 4:42), the world to whom he offers life (6:33,51). This is the world that God loves so much (3:16). The reason for its hatred of Jesus is that 'its works are evil'. We are reminded of an earlier statement: 'This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil' (3:19).

When Jesus does go up to Jerusalem, the ordinary people are afraid to speak openly about him. Some are secretly inclined to approve of him; others are of the opinion that he is 'deceiving the crowds' (compare Matthew 27:63; Luke 23:2).

⁹After saying this, he remained in Galilee.

¹⁰But after his brothers had gone to the festival, then he also went, not publicly but as it were in secret.

¹¹The Jews were looking for him at the festival and saying, 'Where is he?'

¹²And there was considerable complaining about him among the crowds. While some were saying, 'He is a good man,' others were saying, 'No, he is deceiving the crowd.'

¹³Yet no one would speak openly about him for fear of the Jews.

¹⁴About the middle of the festival Jesus went up into the temple and began to teach.

¹⁵The Jews were astonished at it, saying, 'How does this man have such learning, when he has never been taught?'

¹⁶Then Jesus answered them, 'My teaching is not mine but his who sent me.

¹⁷Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own.

¹⁸Those who speak on their own seek their own glory; but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and there is nothing false in him.

¹⁹Did not Moses give you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law. Why are you looking for an opportunity to kill me?'

²⁰The crowd answered, 'You have a demon! Who is trying to kill you?'

Act IV Scene 2. During the festival

The scene is set in one of the porticoes of the temple. Jesus is teaching a crowd which includes some of the religious leaders. These latter are astonished because Jesus teaches so well and yet has never been under a master and so is not part of the establishment. We are reminded of another kind of astonishment experienced by the ordinary people: 'The crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes' (Matthew 7:28-29).

He is not part of the establishment. He has learned from the best of masters, God himself.

On an earlier occasion Jesus had pointed out to them that if they truly loved God and had a place in their heart for God's word, and if they sought God's glory and not their own, they would recognise God's word in his teaching (see 5:38-44). Here he has a similar message, adding the idea that the key to accepting Jesus' word is willingness to do God's will (compare 3:36). If they were truly willing to listen to God they would see that Jesus, like the suffering servant 'had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth' (Isaiah 53:9).

The authorities exercise their power precisely as guardians of the Law. We already know that they are seeking to kill Jesus (5:18; 7:1). Jesus accuses them of this point blank, insisting that in this they are breaking the very Law which they claim to uphold. If they were open to the word of God expressed in their Scriptures, they would recognise him, for, as he said on an earlier occasion, the Scriptures 'testify on my behalf' (5:39).

It is the crowd who object to what Jesus is saying. They think Jesus must be demented to think that their revered leaders would do such a thing! The irony is striking.

On an earlier occasion at the pool of Beth-zatha, Jesus was accused of breaking the Law (5:10). He defended his action then, claiming that he was continuing God's action in the world (5:17), and that in doing so he was carrying out his Father's will (5:19). Here Jesus refers back to that incident and argues that if, according to the Law, it is proper to perform the life-giving action of circumcision, why is it not proper to bring healing to the whole of a man's body?

As already noted, the feast of Booths celebrated among other things the giving of the Law. John is portraying Jesus as greater than Moses for 'the Law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ'(1:17). The authorities are not concerned with grace or truth. They 'judge by appearances'. If they really were 'resolved to do the will of God', they would want what God wants. They are willing to circumcise a man on the Sabbath in order to make him a member of God's chosen people. How can they object to Jesus when he offers healing to the whole man on the Sabbath? If they were attentive to God, they would welcome the full participation in the life of God which Jesus is offering to 'everyone who believes in him'(3:16).

²¹Jesus answered them, 'I performed one work, and all of you are astonished.

²²Moses gave you circumcision (it is, of course, not from Moses, but from the patriarchs),

and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath.

²³If a man receives circumcision on the Sabbath in order that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because I healed a man's whole body on the Sabbath?

²⁴Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment.'

²⁵Now some of the people of Jerusalem were saying, 'Is not this the man whom they are trying to kill?' ²⁶And here he is, speaking openly, but they say nothing to him! Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Messiah?

²⁷Yet we know where this man is from; but when the Messiah comes, no one will know where he is from.'

²⁸Then Jesus cried out as he was teaching in the temple, 'You know me, and you know where I am from. I have not come on my own. But the one who sent me is true, and you do not know him. ²⁹I know him, because I am from him, and he sent me.'

³⁰Then they tried to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him, because his hour had not yet come.

³¹Yet many in the crowd believed in him and were saying, 'When the Messiah comes, will he do more signs than this man has done?'

³²The Pharisees heard the crowd muttering such things about him, and the chief priests and Pharisees sent temple police to arrest him.

Act IV Scene 3. Later during the festival

The festival of Booths is still being celebrated and Jesus is again in the temple precincts. Word has got around that there is a plot to kill him. However, since Jesus is speaking so openly and no one is doing anything about it, some of the people are wondering whether perhaps the authorities (those John normally calls 'the Jews') may 'really know that this is the Messiah'. This is heavy with irony. Firstly, they do not realise how truly they are speaking, for indeed Jesus is the Messiah, and secondly, we know how wrong they are in their assessment of their leaders.

Jesus has just said not to 'judge by appearances' (7:24), and this is exactly what these people now proceed to do. They express one of the prevailing opinions at the time, which was that the Messiah would appear suddenly and be of unknown origin. They decide that Jesus could not be the Messiah because 'we know where this man is from' (compare 6:42). How wrong they are! From the opening words of the Gospel we have been told his origin: 'The Word was with God' (1:1). He is 'God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart'. He 'became flesh and lived among us' (1:14) to 'make God known' (1:18). He is the 'Son of Man who descended from heaven' (3:13), sent by the Father 'that the world might be saved through him' (3:17). He 'comes from above', 'from heaven' (3:31; 6:38,51,58), to 'give life to the world' (6:33). He is 'from God; he has seen the Father' (6:46; compare Matthew 11:27). They do not know this.

Earlier (7:18), Jesus claimed that the one who sent him is 'true' (Greek: *alêthês* - not false). Here we find the same expression but John uses *alêthinôs*. He is sent by the one who is real as nothing else is real. They do not know who Jesus is because they do not know God. An attempt is made to arrest him. It fails because 'the hour' designed by God had not yet come (see commentary on 2:4). We are watching events being played out on two levels. There is the level of human will, and there is the level of divine providence. John is reminding us that we are watching God's providential design working itself out in the events of Jesus' life. The Sanhedrin send temple police in another attempt to arrest Jesus.

Jesus has just said he has come from God whom they do not know. Now he reveals that he is returning to the God who sent him. He has come searching for them. They are rejecting him now, but the time will come when they will realise what they have done and they will come searching for him. It will be too late. We are reminded of the words of the prophets: 'Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near' (Isaiah 55:6). 'They shall go to seek the Lord, but they will not find him; he has withdrawn from them' (Hosea 5:6). It will be too late for those who reject Jesus. They have failed to follow the advice of Moses: 'You will seek the Lord your God, and you will find him if you search after him with all your heart and soul' (Deuteronomy 4:29).

Jesus is Wisdom incarnate. Of Wisdom it is said: 'She is easily discerned by those who love her, and is found by those who seek her' (Wisdom 6:12). They have failed to discern Wisdom, for, as we read in the Book of Proverbs: 'They will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently, but will not find me. Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord' (Proverbs 1:28-29).

Jesus tells them: 'I will be with you a little while longer'. His words are proclaimed not only to those who are present with him in the temple, but also to us. He is summoning us to respond now while the opportunity lasts. As he will say later: 'The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going' (12:35).

Typically, the religious authorities fail to understand Jesus. Their words are loaded with irony, for by the time John is writing, the word of Jesus has indeed gone into the Diaspora and it is the Gentiles who have responded with faith to the one whom 'the Jews' are rejecting.

³³Jesus then said, 'I will be with you a little while longer, and then I am going to him who sent me.'

³⁴You will search for me, but you will not find me; and where I am, you cannot come.'

³⁵The Jews said to one another, 'Where does this man intend to go that we will not find him? Does he intend to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks and teach the Greeks?'

³⁶What does he mean by saying, "You will search for me and you will not find me" and "Where I am, you cannot come?"'

³⁷On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, ³⁸and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water."'

³⁹Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

⁴⁰When they heard these words, some in the crowd said, 'This is really the prophet.'

⁴¹Others said, 'This is the Messiah'.

But some asked, 'Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he?'

⁴²Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?' ⁴³So there was a division in the crowd because of him.

⁴⁴Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him.

Act IV Scene 4. The last day of the festival

It is 'the last day of the festival', the day of rejoicing in the Torah. Women are bringing water to the temple from the pool of Siloam which is fed from the Gihon spring. They are chanting the words of Isaiah: 'With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation' (Isaiah 12:3). Others are pouring the water over the altar and it is flowing through the temple precincts. Standing opposite them is Jesus, inviting anyone who is thirsty to come to *him*. The temple has been cleared (2:13-22). If we wish to find God's presence among us we must now look to the new temple, Jesus himself (2:21). If we are thirsty, we must now go to him. As the Book of Revelation says: 'The Lamb will guide them to springs of the water of life' (Revelation 7:17). Jesus has already said to the Samaritan woman: 'Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life' (4:14).

The Greek text reads: 'Out of his heart' (7:38). The translation which we are following has chosen to interpret 'his' as referring to the believer, and this is how the text was frequently understood by the early commentators. It is a development from the idea expressed in Jesus' statement to the Samaritan woman. Rivers of life-giving water will not only spring up within the heart of believers but will also flow out to others. We might compare the following statement from Isaiah: 'The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail' (Isaiah 58:11).

The above paragraph speaks of one interpretation of the words 'Out of his heart'. However, the word 'his' in this phrase may also refer to Jesus. When the Israelites complained of thirst, God commanded Moses to strike the rock and 'he made streams come out of the rock, and caused waters to flow down like rivers' (Psalm 78:16). As Saint Paul says: 'They drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ' (1Corinthians 10:4). The water of life is now flowing, not from Jerusalem (Zechariah 14:8), from the 'right side of the temple building' (Ezekiel 47:1), but from the heart of Jesus himself (see 19:34).

As in the scene by Jacob's well, the water is a symbol for Jesus himself, the revelation of God's life-giving Wisdom. It is also, as is made explicit here, a symbol of the promised Spirit: 'I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my spirit upon your descendants' (Isaiah 44:3). The Spirit was given by God at creation. The same Spirit was offered through the words of the prophets and came as a healing refreshment in the temple liturgy. However, the Spirit for which the prophets had longed, the Messianic gift, could come only from the heart of the Word-made-flesh, 'God the only Son who is close to the Father's heart' (1:18). This gift has to await Jesus' hour of glory (7:39), for the Spirit which he promises, the Spirit in which he baptises us, is the very love which he shares with the Father in his human glorified heart. Jesus will offer this gift to his disciples after his death, resurrection and ascension to his Father (20:22). Paul assures us that 'hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Romans 5:5).

Once again we see different groups responding differently to Jesus and we are challenged to decide where we stand. In the previous passage Jesus was rejected by those who thought that the Messiah would be of unknown origin (7:27). The irony lay in the fact that while they thought they knew Jesus' origin, they did not know that he came from God. Here he is rejected by those who thought that the Messiah, as David's heir, would come from Bethlehem (see Micah 5:1-2). They too were 'judging by appearances' (7:24). They thought that they knew that Jesus came from Galilee. Ironically, as we know from elsewhere (see Matthew 2:1; Luke 2:4-7), and as John seems here to take for granted, though Jesus was known as a Galilean, he was actually born in Bethlehem. More importantly, he is the Son of Man who comes from heaven, he is the Son of God who comes from God his Father.

⁴⁵Then the temple police went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, 'Why did you not arrest him?'

⁴⁶The police answered, 'Never has anyone spoken like this!'

⁴⁷Then the Pharisees replied, 'Surely you have not been deceived too, have you?'

⁴⁸Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him? ⁴⁹But this crowd, which does not know the law— they are accursed.'

⁵⁰Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before, and who was one of them, asked, ⁵¹'Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?'

⁵²They replied, 'Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee.'

The crowd disperses. Jesus is standing alone centre stage. The temple police move to the back and side of the stage where we see representatives of the Sanhedrin. They are asked why they have not brought Jesus. John has already answered this question for us at the level of divine design: 'his hour had not yet come'(7:30). He now looks at the situation from the point of view of human behaviour. The police did not arrest Jesus because they were so impressed by his teaching (compare Matthew 7:28-29).

Their reaction is in sharp contrast with that of the authorities who demonstrate their pride and their incapacity to comprehend how anyone could be impressed by Jesus when it is so obvious to them that he is a deceiver. They can put it down only to the ignorance of the uneducated rabble, an ignorance which puts them outside the saving power of the Law: 'Cursed be anyone who does not uphold the words of this law by observing them'(Deuteronomy 27:26).

In the Prologue John laments that 'his own people did not accept him'(1:11). However, the rejection was not universal. There were those who responded to God's grace and received God's Word (1:12-13). Even among the ranks of the authorities grace is working. Nicodemus objects that his peers, by judging Jesus without giving him a hearing, are themselves breaking the law. His words are heavily loaded with discipleship language. He is saying that the only way to really know Jesus is to listen to him. The authorities are breaking the law because they are deaf to its message.

The implication is that they who are so ready to look down on others are the very ones whose behaviour is 'accursed'. They will have none of this and turn on Nicodemus. They accuse him of being ignorant. They tell him to go and look up the Scriptures. Nowhere is it mentioned that the prophet will arise from Galilee. They are still 'judging by appearances'(7:24).

Insert. The woman who committed adultery

If we were among those listening to John's Gospel when it was first presented, we would not have heard this story. It found its way into the gospel at the end of the third century and there are many features of style that are not John's. It is a story about Jesus that was circulating orally and was later placed here because it illustrates a central theme of John's Gospel and of this section.

Chapters seven and eight summon us to decision. If we are not for Jesus we are against him. We have to choose between the attitude to the Law and so to God which is exemplified by the religious leaders and the attitude exemplified by Jesus. Soon we will hear Jesus say: 'You judge by human standards; I judge no one' (8:15). In this scene we witness a powerful illustration of this truth and of the words enunciated earlier in the Gospel: 'God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him' (3:17).

The theme of judgment is introduced when the author mentions the Mount of Olives (not mentioned otherwise in John's Gospel). In visionary material from the Zechariah scroll we read:

The Lord will go forth and fight against those nations as when he fights on a day of battle. On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, which lies before Jerusalem on the east.

– Zechariah 14:3-4

Popular imagination thought of the Mount of Olives as the stage for the last judgment. The author is preparing us for a scene of divine judgment on the woman and on the Pharisees, and on us as well depending on where we choose to take our stand.

The scene takes place in the temple precincts. The scribes (students of the Law not mentioned otherwise in John's Gospel) and the Pharisees bring the woman to Jesus. They address Jesus as 'Teacher' (we would expect 'Rabbi', see 1:38 and 3:2).

⁵³Then each of them went home. ¹Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.

²Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them.

³The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, ⁴they said to him, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery.'

I do not condemn you

⁵Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?'

⁶They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him.

Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. ⁷When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.'

⁸And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground.

⁹When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.

¹⁰Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?'

¹¹She said, 'No one, sir.'

And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.'

They are seeking his opinion as to how they should treat a woman caught in adultery. They are seeking it not to be enlightened but to trap him. If he says that she should not be killed, he can be charged with failing to respect the Mosaic Law (Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:21; Ezekiel 16:38-40). If he says that she should be killed, the emptiness of his claim not to judge will be apparent. There is some evidence that in c.30AD the Roman authorities took away from the Sanhedrin the right to inflict capital punishment (see 18:31). If this is so, a proclamation that she should be killed would have given them a reason to charge him also with encouraging disobedience to the Roman governing authority.

At first Jesus says nothing. In a symbolic action he lowers himself into the dust and begins to write. He is mimicking the writing of a judgment. He is also demonstrating that one cannot make a just judgment 'from above'. We are observing God's Word who has become flesh to experience our human weakness (he is in the dust with us) and to draw us into communion with God. We are reminded of the words of the Psalmist:

The Lord does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him. For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.

– Psalm 103:10-14

Jesus then rises up to give his judgment. He directs it first of all to the woman's accusers. Before standing in judgment over another, they should look to their own behaviour. We are left to imagine the penetrating gaze of the one who 'knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone' (2:24-25). Jesus again lowers himself and the accusers walk off leaving Jesus and the woman alone.

With no witnesses and no accusers, there is no legal case to answer. Once again Jesus rises up to give his judgment, directed this time to her. It is not a judgment of condemnation. At the same time his words make it abundantly clear that forgiveness does not deny the gravity of sin. Paul warns us not to abuse ‘the kindness and forbearance and patience of God. Do you not realize that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?’ (Romans 2:4).

As noted in our commentary on 3:36, God does not judge us or punish us from the outside as it were. When we speak of God as judge and as punishing, we are saying that God cannot pretend that things are other than they really are. We stand judged by what we do and evil has its effects that cannot just be wished away. These effects are the punishment which we bring on ourselves when we sin. They also add to the sludge of sin that pollutes the environment in which others have to live. If we remove our tongue, we cannot speak. If we obstinately reject God’s love, we cannot enjoy God’s embrace.

What Jesus reveals is that all the gentle forgiving love of God is there to bring about a change in our hearts and in our attitudes and actions. Our hope is that Jesus’ courtesy, his gentleness and his love would have given this woman the strength and encouragement she needed to heed his warning. Our hope is that finding true love she found the strength she needed to stop seeking a love that is false. God is offering us the same forgiving love that he is offering this woman through Jesus. May it achieve a similar repentance.

¹²Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.'

¹³Then the Pharisees said to him, 'You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid.'

¹⁴Jesus answered, 'Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid because I know where I have come from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going.'

¹⁵You judge by human standards; I judge no one.

¹⁶Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is valid; for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me.

¹⁷In your law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is valid. ¹⁸I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf.'

¹⁹Then they said to him, 'Where is your Father?'

Jesus answered, 'You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.'

²⁰He spoke these words while he was teaching in the treasury of the temple, but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.

Act IV Scene 5. At the temple treasury

In Scene Four Jesus offered himself as the source of life-giving water. Here he offers himself as the source of life-giving light. We recall the words of the Psalmist: 'You give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light' (Psalm 36:8-9). Water and light feature strongly in the cult associated with the festival of Booths. To one side we see people lighting the golden lamps that give a hesitant artificial light. Opposite them stands Jesus calling to all involved in the festival and to all witnessing the drama: 'I am the light of the world'.

God created light (Genesis 1:3). 'In God there is no darkness at all' (1John 1:5). The Psalmist sings with joy: 'The Lord is my light and my salvation' (Psalm 27:1). God went before his people like a pillar of fire (Exodus 13:21; see Wisdom 18:3). This same God was present in the temple lighting up their way. The temple, however, has completed its task (see 2:13-22). Now it is to Jesus that we must look to see God's presence revealed (2:21). He is 'the light of life' (Psalm 56:13). He is 'God the only Son' (1:18) come to redeem us, Wisdom incarnate: 'a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God' (Wisdom 7:26).

Jesus is not simply claiming to be 'the light of the world'. He is also inviting us to come to him and to walk in his light: 'Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life'. Commenting on this verse, Augustine quotes from Paul a passage which was significant in his own conversion:

The night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

– Romans 13:12-14

Following Jesus involves continual re-commitment to ‘walk in the light as he himself is in the light’ (1John 1:7). Since God is love, walking in the light is before all else allowing the light of Jesus’ love to shine through all our relationships (see 1John 2:10-11).

At the feast of Booths the people were celebrating the gift of the Torah as their light, a light that was given them that it might shine out throughout the whole world. Sirach writes: ‘I will again make instruction shine forth like the dawn, and I will make it clear from far away’ (Sirach 24:32). Jesus presents himself as the light of the world. ‘What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people’ (1:4). He fulfils the promise expressed by Isaiah: ‘The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shone’ (Isaiah 9:2; quoted Matthew 4:16). If we come to him, stay with him and walk with him, it will be his life that will light our path.

We are reminded of an earlier discussion on the validity of Jesus’ claims (see 5:31-39). There Jesus accepted that they would not accept his testimony as being true, in the sense of valid as testimony (5:31). Here he claims that what he says about himself is nevertheless true (Greek: *alêthês*, 8:14). In verse sixteen he claims that his judgment is the only judgment truly worthy of the name (Greek: *alêthinôs*). Notice Jesus talking to the Pharisees about ‘your Law’ (8:17). Like the expression ‘your father Abraham’ (8:56) it would be heard by John’s readers against the background of the separation of Jewish Christians from the synagogue.

The fact that the Pharisees reject the evidence given by his Father is proof that they do not know God. They are ‘walking in darkness’ (8:12). The theme of light immediately leads to the theme of judgment, for as we have already learned: ‘The light shines in the darkness’ (1:5). ‘This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God’ (3:19-21).

Judgment is necessary. It matters what we do and we cannot ignore the effects of our attitudes and actions. All is known to God, ‘the Father who sent Jesus’ (8:18). Jesus, however, accuses the Pharisees of judging falsely, because they judge ‘by human standards’ (literally, ‘by the flesh’; see 3:6; 6:63; also 1Corinthians 1:26; 2Corinthians 5:16). Jesus does not judge on his own authority; nor does he judge by appearances. Furthermore his judgment, coming as it does from the one who sent him, is not a judgment of condemnation but one of salvation. ‘Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him’ (3:17). When Jesus claims, as he did earlier, that ‘the Father has given all judgment to the Son’ (5:22; see 9:39), he is claiming that we stand judged not by him but by the way we respond to him. The value of our lives is measured by the way we listen to God’s Word and accept the invitation to divine intimacy. To reject it is to reject life.

John concludes this section by referring, once again (see 7:30,44) to the intention of the authorities to arrest Jesus. However ‘his hour had not come yet’ (see comment on 2:4).

²¹Again he said to them, 'I am going away, and you will search for me, but you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come.'

²²Then the Jews said, 'Is he going to kill himself? Is that what he means by saying, "Where I am going, you cannot come"?''

²³He said to them, 'You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world. ²⁴I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he.'

²⁵They said to him, 'Who are you?'

Jesus said to them, 'Why do I speak to you at all? ²⁶I have much to say about you and much to condemn; but the one who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him.'

²⁷They did not understand that he was speaking to them about the Father.

²⁸So Jesus said, 'When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realise that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. ²⁹And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him.'

³⁰As he was saying these things, many believed in him.

The need to believe in Jesus is an urgent one. It will soon be too late (compare 7:33). Note the use of the singular 'sin' in verse twenty-one and the plural 'sins' in verse twenty-three. The basic sin for John is that of refusing to believe in Jesus. Other sins follow on this refusal (see commentary on 1:29). Jesus warns them – and John is warning his community and us – that if we do not believe in Jesus we will find, one day, that we are searching for him and are unable to find him. To be trapped in sin is, indeed, a slavery. Did they know how enslaved they were? Do we? If we do, what kind of a saviour are we looking for?

The authorities misunderstand Jesus' words about going away. This, as we have seen, is a common literary device in John. It enables him to take us with him as he penetrates to a deeper meaning in Jesus' words. First of all Jesus repeats earlier assertions about his being 'from above' (see 3:31), and then he declares that they will be released from their sins only if they believe that he is who he is claiming to be: the one who is with the Father and has been sent by the Father to be the light of the world and to save them from sin.

Again we hear the 'I am' (egô eimi, 8:24 and 8:28; see 4:26; 6:20) linking Jesus with the revelation of the redeemer Lord. This leads for the first time to an explicit question concerning Jesus' identity: 'Who are you?' (8:25).

Jesus seems exhausted with them: 'Why do I speak to you at all?' They are obstinate in their refusal to listen. The accusations which Jesus levels against them are harsh, but similar accusations abound in the writings of the prophets. Like the prophets, and much more, Jesus is wanting to wake them up to their sin in order to bring about repentance. He wants them to leave the darkness and follow the life-giving light. Jesus repeats his claim, preceding it and following it with assertions that what he is saying comes from his Father (8:26,28).

He makes his declaration 'to the world'. Addressing himself to those in the crowd who would one day become disciples, he says that the truth of his claim will become obvious 'when you have lifted up the Son of Man'. We recall his words to Nicodemus: 'Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life'(3:14-15).

They are rejecting Jesus because they are not searching for someone who, as the Son of Man, has come from heaven to identify with the poor, the oppressed and the outcast (see 1:51). They will see who he is when they lift him up on the cross and 'look on the one whom they have pierced'(19:31). But will they accept what they see? Or will they continue to reject their Saviour and so 'die in their sin'? 'All things came into being through him' (1:3). We were created for him. There is no other way out of the slavery in which we find ourselves. To reject the Son of Man is to reject life and so to reject the light. We will find ourselves walking in darkness.

Jesus' words are spoken in obedience to his Father. It is the same for his actions: 'I always do what is pleasing to my Father'(compare 1John 3:22). This will become apparent to those with eyes to see when Jesus is 'lifted up'. That will be his 'hour' of glory, for then he will reveal God as a God of love. As Jesus said on an earlier occasion: 'Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing'(5:19-20). The Father who sent Jesus on his mission of love remains with him who 'was in the beginning with God'(1:2), 'the only Son who is close to the Father's heart'(1:18).

As we pointed out in introducing the Gospel of John, and as has by now become obvious to the reader, John's focus throughout the Gospel is on Jesus' divinity, that is to say, on the intimate communion of love which he experienced with God whom he calls 'Father'. This intimate communion is the human expression of the intimate communion which the Word experiences with God, for Jesus is the incarnation of the Word.

John does not want us to distract ourselves from this truth, but neither does he want us to forget that Jesus truly is 'flesh' as we are flesh. It is as the 'Son of Man' that he experiences this communion, and it is when we look at him lifted up on the cross that we, like the Beloved Disciple himself, will see his divinity most powerfully and most beautifully revealed. That is when we will realise that Jesus 'is he'.

³¹Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³²and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.'

³³They answered him, 'We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, "You will be made free"?"'

³⁴Jesus answered them, 'Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.

³⁵The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. ³⁶So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

³⁷I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you look for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word.

³⁸I declare what I have seen in the Father's presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father.'

³⁹They answered him, 'Abraham is our father.'

Jesus said to them, 'If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did, ⁴⁰but now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. ⁴¹You are indeed doing what your father does.'

This is the final confrontation in this series of confrontations which John has placed in the context of the festival of Booths. The author speaks of Jesus in relation to Abraham, balancing in this way the opening dialogue of Scene Two in which he spoke of Jesus in relation to Moses (7:14-24).

John explains that Jesus is addressing 'the Jews who had believed in him' (see 8:30). It soon becomes clear that their belief is of the superficial kind that Jesus does not trust (see 2:23-25). Jesus begins by inviting them to abide in his word by living within the revelation of God which he is offering them. As we read in a letter coming from John's community: 'Everyone who does not abide in the teaching of Christ, but goes beyond it, does not have God; whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son' (2John 9).

The Jewish people were rightly proud of their freedom – the freedom to serve only the Lord by obeying the covenant. The obvious implication of Jesus' offer of freedom is that they need liberating. As 'descendants of Abraham' they find this suggestion offensive. They seem to assume that being children of Abraham automatically makes them children of God. This has already been contradicted in the Prologue. To be a child of God is not a matter of physical descent. It is a matter of receiving God's Word and believing in him (1:12-13).

To claim, as they are claiming, to be following God's Law while rejecting Jesus' word is to show that they are indeed living in slavery. As Paul says to the Christians of Galatia who were tempted to revert to Judaism: 'For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery' (Galatians 5:1).

God sent his Son to ‘take away the sin of the world’(1:29). God wants to wash us clean from our sins and shed upon us the light of his love. He wants to be the bridegroom of our souls. If we remain bound by the restrictions of our religious attitudes and closed to Jesus’ words, we will never ‘know the truth’; we will never be free; we will remain ‘a slave to sin’(compare Romans 6:17; 2Peter 2:19).

Jesus speaks of the difference between the place of a son and that of a domestic slave (compare Matthew 17:25-26). If they want to be truly free they must be true children of Abraham: children not just physically but spiritually. If they are children of Abraham’s faith they will recognise Jesus as the fulfilment of the promise which God gave to Abraham:

I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.

– Genesis 22:17-18

They cannot truly be children of Abraham if they are seeking to kill the very one who brings the fulfilment of this promise. In failing to do what they have heard from *the* Father, they are demonstrating the unreality of their belief. As Jesus said on an earlier occasion: ‘You do not have his word abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent’(5:38).

In case we might be tempted to see the crucifixion of Jesus as some kind of automatic playing out of a preconceived divine plan, Jesus’ words here make it plain that the reason for their determination to kill Jesus is that ‘there is no place in you for my word’(8:37). As noted earlier (see commentary on 3:14), Jesus was crucified by those who rejected God’s will. It was because of the way in which Jesus gave his life in love that his dying could become an instrument of divine salvation. The disobedience of those who are rejecting Jesus’ words stands out in stark contrast to the obedience of Jesus who declares only what he has seen in his Father’s presence. We recall his earlier statement: ‘Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise’(5:19).

Abraham was a man of faith. He heard God’s word, he took notice of what he heard and he acted accordingly (see 3:15). What matters is spiritual descent from Abraham: sharing in Abraham’s faith (compare Romans 9:7). They are rejecting God’s word, how can they claim to be children of Abraham or of God? They are obviously drawing their ‘life’ from somewhere else.

^{41b}They said to him, 'We are not illegitimate children; we have one father, God himself.'

⁴²Jesus said to them, 'If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me. ⁴³Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word.

⁴⁴You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

⁴⁵But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me.

⁴⁶Which of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me?

⁴⁷Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God.'

Jesus has questioned their parentage. His words sting. They respond by declaring that they are not born of prostitution – an image, common in biblical literature since the time of Hosea, for those who are unfaithful to the covenant (see Hosea 1:2). They assert that God is their Father.

Jesus disagrees: 'If God were your Father you would love me'. Their rejection of Jesus shows that they do not know God (see 7:28). They cannot even hear what Jesus is saying, so hardened are they against God's word. No, their behaviour demonstrates that they are living the 'life' of another father, neither Abraham nor God, but the devil (compare 1John 3:8,10).

It was the murderous devil who tempted Cain to kill Abel (Genesis 4:7). In determining to kill Jesus they are following in Cain's footsteps (compare 1John 3:12-15). It was the lying devil who tempted Eve (Genesis 3:4-5), and as we read in a letter written from John's community: 'Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the Antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son' (1John 2:22). If they were children of God they would listen to God's word being spoken to them by Jesus, who is sinless (compare Hebrews 4:15), for he speaks the truth (compare 7:18).

Jesus' accusations against them are enough to convince the authorities that he is acting under the influence of an evil spirit (compare Mark 3:22). They obviously do not have a high opinion of Samaritans (see commentary on 4:4). Jesus is not going to be persuaded by their poor opinion of him. He has come to speak the truth and speak it he will. His one concern is the glory of his Father. As for any glory he might receive, it will be given him by his Father.

Jesus makes a final appeal to them: if they would only heed his word and take it to heart they would never experience death. We are reminded of his earlier statement: 'Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life' (5:24; see 3:36). They misunderstand Jesus, taking him to be speaking of physical death, which leads them to the question: 'Who do you claim to be?' – literally 'What are you making yourself?'

On an earlier occasion they claimed that Jesus was making himself equal to God (5:18). We commented then that Jesus was not 'making himself' anything. All that he is and all that he has comes from the Father. He is 'the bridegroom' (3:29), because he is 'the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart' (1:18). He 'gives the Spirit without measure' (3:34) because the Spirit 'descended on him from heaven and remained on him' (1:32). All that he says, he says because he has listened to the heart of his Father. All that he does, he does in obedience to his Father.

They do not recognise Jesus because, in spite of their claims to the contrary, they 'do not know God'. We recall Jesus' earlier words: 'the one who sent me is true, and you do not know him. I know him, because I am from him, and he sent me' (7:28-29). Jesus knows God and keeps God's word. They do not know God because they are unwilling to keep God's word. They prefer darkness to light 'because their deeds are evil' (3:20).

48The Jews answered him, 'Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?'

49Jesus answered, 'I do not have a demon; but I honour my Father, and you dishonour me.'

50Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is one who seeks it and he is the judge.'

51Very truly, I tell you, whoever keeps my word will never see death.'

52The Jews said to him, 'Now we know that you have a demon. Abraham died, and so did the prophets; yet you say, 'Whoever keeps my word will never taste death.' **53**Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? The prophets also died. Who do you claim to be?'

54Jesus answered, 'If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, he of whom you say, "He is our God", **55**though you do not know him. But I know him; if I would say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you. But I do know him and I keep his word.'

⁵⁶Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad.'

⁵⁷Then the Jews said to him, 'You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?'

⁵⁸Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.'

⁵⁹So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

Abraham, the one whom they claim as their father, rejoiced when his wife conceived, for God was beginning to keep his promise (Genesis 17:17). Jesus is the fulfilment of that promise (compare 5:46 in relation to Moses). In this sense, as we read in the Letter to the Hebrews: 'from a distance our ancestors saw and greeted God's promises' (Hebrews 11:13). Those seeking Jesus' life should be sharing in Abraham's joy and not trying to kill him. They misunderstand Jesus, thinking that he is claiming to have been a contemporary of Abraham. The irony is that they are speaking to him who 'was in the beginning with God' (1:2).

Jesus clarifies his meaning by proclaiming: 'Before Abraham was, *I am*' (egô eimi, see 4:26; 6:20; 8:24; 8:28). At the burning bush, Moses asked God his name. To name is to define and to control. Moses cannot name God, so God replies: 'Say to the Israelites *I am* has sent me to you' (Exodus 3:14). Jesus identifies himself as this 'I am'. He is the one sent by the Lord Yahweh to redeem the world.

The religious leaders find his claim blasphemous and proceed to carry out the punishment required by law: 'One who blasphemes the name of the Lord shall be put to death; the whole congregation shall stone the blasphemer' (Leviticus 24:16).

The final verse emphasises the tragedy. At the time of the Exile, the Lord departed from the temple (see Ezekiel 10:4,18; 11:23). Now the light of the world (8:12) goes out of the temple. The religious leaders stayed behind with their theology, their images of God, and the security afforded them by their position, their power and their prestige. In refusing to follow Jesus, they refused to leave their father and their father's house and move on to the promised land. They are not true children of Abraham (see Genesis 12:1).

The dispute against the background of the feast of Booths is full of tragic contrasts. On the one side stands the temple, light streaming from it and water flowing from the right side of the altar. Over against this stands Jesus calling the people to come to him for water (7:37-38) and light (8:12). At every turn we are reminded of the fact that while Jesus is offering life, his own life is in danger (7:1,13,19,25,30,32; 8:37,40,59). The religious authorities reject Jesus' claims, while Jesus exposes them to the people as false leaders. The dominant theme is the manifestation and rejection of the Word as life and light. The temple authorities are obstinate in rejecting Jesus. In refusing to allow God's word to penetrate their hardened hearts, they choose darkness rather than light. Their 'deeds are evil'(3:19).