

The Feast of Tabernacles, or Sukkot, is the third and final Autumn feast that God instituted for Israel and it has a very different feel to the previous two.

After the days of self-examination and repentance, the Israelites were to set aside time for celebration and rejoicing.

Sukkot is a long feast with various actions and traditions, some of which developed in the days of the Temple, and others after the Temple was destroyed.

The Feast was to remind God's people of their time in the Wilderness and God's provision for them.

It is also known as the Festival of In-gathering and it is a harvest festival. In Israel, the crops grow mostly over the winter during the rains and may be left in the fields over the summer to ripen and dry out. By the seventh month, which in our calendar spans September and October, the crops have been harvested and are in the store houses ready for milling or planting.

God instructed Moses that the Feast should last for seven days. It would be a pilgrimage festival, with the men travelling to the place God designated to celebrate. Every seventh year, the whole nation was to come together, so all who could travel – men, women and children – would make the pilgrimage.

The first day was to be a day of solemn rest and no ordinary work should be done, then the following six days were to be a time of great rejoicing with food offerings. He also instructed that there should be another day of solemn rest at the end, a bonus day, the eighth day of the feast. A day for rejoicing in the Lord.

So there are two principles underlying Sukkot: Remembrance and Rejoicing.

In the literature Robin Lane brought last week, there was an article about the Hebrew word, Zakar. In Hebrew, verbs do a lot of work and imply action: the writer, Melissa Briggs, records that Zakar mean to remember, to be mindful, to call to mind, to celebrate and to report.

When the Bible notes that God remembers His covenant and His people, it is not that they have just popped into His mind, but that he has actively called them to mind and He intends to act upon that thought.

When God instructs His people to remember who He is and great things that He has done, He means that we must be active in calling them to mind, we must consider and celebrate them. He knows our human frailty leads to forgetfulness, whether that is due to dwelling on problems, being distracted or busy, or simply due to age or infirmity.

By instituting this feast, God was giving the Israelites a way to actively remember His Provision.

Because it was a pilgrimage feast, once a year all the men in the nation who were able to travel would re-enact the journey through the Wilderness in their journey to Jerusalem.

The people would re-enact the nomadic desert life, by leaving the security of their house and living in a rickety, temporary booth which they have built themselves with palm leaves and sticks. The roof could not be fully covered, there had to be gaps so that those sleeping in the booth could see the stars and remember the One who flung those stars into space.

There would be years when the harvest was poor, and there would be a temptation to fear or despair. Choosing to obey the instructions to sacrifice animals and grain would have been very hard, and to celebrate that must have been even harder for those in need. But the active remembrance

would call to their minds that God provided food and water for their ancestors in the desert and would provide for them.

When the harvest was abundant, there must have been a temptation to feel proud and self-reliant, particularly for those who have a tendency to be a workaholic or to tie their self-worth up with work. This would be counteracted by the choice to stop work and accept temporary insecurity and discomfort, an active remembrance that they were dependent on the God who could provide water out of a rock and quail in the desert without the work of man. The decision to rest is an act of dependence on God.

The Feast of Tabernacles is also called "The season of our joy".

It comes after the period of repentance and putting relationships right. At Yom Kippur, the nation repented and is now back in a right relationship with God. There is no period of false guilt, of the person dwelling on old sins or dragging up the past. That is dealt with and the instruction is to show great joy at God's mercy and the reconciliation. As with remembrance, this is not just a feeling but an active rejoicing. They are to gather vegetation to wave and there is dancing and shouting for joy. They are not waiting to feel joyful or hampered by embarrassment, like David they are to be unself-conscious in their joy.

They are also not to wait until they feel completely secure to rejoice. Whether that year's harvest has gone well or not, they are now waiting for the winter rains. Will the rains come, will sufficient rain fall at the right time? Abundant grain for planting does not guarantee an abundant harvest. The people are to rejoice in God's provision in the past – the Manna in the desert – the present and the future, with hope. As Hebrews 11 v 1 says, Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." The Israelites are to base their hope for the future, on the active remembrance of the past and that will quell their fears and fuel their joy.

The Feast is also a time for rejoicing in God's word. On each day of the feast, devout Jews are reading the Hallel, Psalms 113-118, proclaiming:

"Praise the LORD!...From the rising of the sun to its setting, the name of the LORD is to be praised!"
Ps 113

"Tremble, O earth at the presence of the Lord,...who turns the rock into a pool of water..." Ps 114

"You who fear the LORD, trust in the LORD! He is their help and their shield. The LORD has remembered us; He will bless us..."Ps 115

"Oh give thanks to the LORD for He is good; for His steadfast love endures forever!" Ps 118

The eighth day of the feast is called Simchat Torah when the people rejoice in God's Word. In the days of the Kings of Israel and Judah – or at least in the days of those who obeyed God - the whole nation would gather in Jerusalem every seventh year and the King would read the Torah to the nation during the festival culminating in a celebration. Even now Simchat Torah was the day when the Jews reach the end of the yearly Torah readings: with shouts of joy and dancing, the Torah scrolls are parading through the streets and synagogues before the readings start again from the beginning.

But before Simchat Torah, there is another great day of rejoicing: the seventh day of the feast called Hoshana Raba, the Great Salvation. Throughout the week, there were food offerings in the Temple but also drink offerings. This was usually wine, but during Sukkot, the priests also offered water. They would draw water from the spring of Siloam and carry it in golden bowls to the Temple where

it would be poured out with the wine offering as the shofar was blown. On the seventh day of the feast, they would circle the altar seven times pouring out a vast amount of water as the people cried out Hosanna, Save us.

For a nation living in a hot, dry land with no certainty about the winter rains, the offering of precious water was a great act of trust and hope in God. As with the food offering, in years of hardship it must have been very tempting to withhold the offering.

On this day, Jesus stood up in the Temple “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. ³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as³⁹ the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’”

Here is the embodiment of the Great Salvation foretelling the coming of the Holy Spirit.

But what does this mean for us? Is it all in the past, a reminder of the Wilderness and the time before the Holy Spirit was poured out?

Certainly the lessons of active remembrance and active rejoicing are as valuable for us today as for the Israelites. But there is more to come.

In Zechariah 14, Zechariah – whose name means “The LORD remembers” – prophesies about the Day of the LORD.

The nations will declare war on Jerusalem and there will be terrible destruction and violence.

Reading from verse 3:

“Then the LORD will go out and fight against those nations, as he fights on a day of battle. ⁴ On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south. ⁵ You will flee by my mountain valley, for it will extend to Azel. You will flee as you fled from the earthquake^[a] in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him.

⁶ On that day there will be neither sunlight nor cold, frosty darkness. ⁷ It will be a unique day—a day known only to the LORD—with no distinction between day and night. When evening comes, there will be light.”

Although Jerusalem has endured battle and destruction over the centuries, it is clear that this battle will be unlike any that have gone before. As an aside, the slopes of the Mount of Olives are covered with the graves of those who want to be close to the LORD on that day.

But the prophecy continues:

“⁸ On that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem, half of it east to the Dead Sea and half of it west to the Mediterranean Sea, in summer and in winter.

⁹ The LORD will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one LORD, and his name the only name...”

The God who provided water out of the rock in the desert is now causing living water to flow out of Mount Zion. Whether this means literal water or His Holy Spirit, or both, I’ll leave for another day and another preacher! The key point for today is in verses 16:

“16 Then the survivors from all the nations that have attacked Jerusalem will go up year after year to worship the King, the LORD Almighty, and to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles.”

In the Day of the LORD, when the Messiah has returned and is reigning on the earth, the remnants of all nations will travel to Jerusalem and celebrate this feast each year! If Jesus returns in our lifetimes, that will be us!

Jesus prophesied about the Living Water to the Jews at Sukkot and that Living Water, the Holy Spirit was poured out first on the Jews who believed in Him. But it didn't stop there. God also poured out His Spirit on believing Gentiles, not just in Israel, but Asia, Macedonia, Rome and all around the world.

The Feast of Tabernacles was firstly a festival for the Jews alone, but it will become a festival for all God-fearing men and women to remember and rejoice in God's mighty works and provision. And how much greater the rejoicing will be for those who have survived that terrible battle and are in the presence of the Messiah!

There is a warning though, “17 If any of the peoples of the earth do not go up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the LORD Almighty, they will have no rain.” It seems incredible but there may be some who still resist God even after the Day of the LORD, when Jesus is the visible King. Those living in Israel in Zechariah's day knew how terrible drought could be – the eighth day of Sukkot was the day they started fervently praying for the winter rains – and we can see on the TV and online the terrible consequences of drought in parts of Africa and India today; so for someone to choose to reject God and face drought voluntarily seems unbelievable. It can only be a consequence of being completely hardened to sin and pride.

So what does this mean for us.

Let us actively remember our God, let us call His great works and provision to mind and remind each other. Let us choose to be thankful and to rejoice in Him whatever our circumstances, whatever insecurity we face. And let us look forward with hope and expectation to the day when we will see our LORD face to face and will celebrate in His presence with great joy.