

13 Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes – who are they, and where did they come from?"

14 I answered, "Sir, you know."

And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

"The great tribulation" – there are different interpretations of the end times. The definite articles may refer to a final, intense time of hostility before Christ's return, Daniel 12:1, Matthew 24:21, Acts 14:22. It also may refer to persecution already being experienced in John's day, 1 John 2:18, and throughout the church age, "Their robes... made...white" – imagery intended to shock because blood represents the worst kind of stain on white cloth, but only this Blood is effectual to purify.

15 Therefore, "they are before the throne of God and serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will shelter them with His presence.

"Before the throne of God... in His temple" – literally on the centre of the throne (and v.17). The

IN PRACTICE The teacher in Solomon's Portico is the same as the risen Lord who we see restoring life and health in Joppa, and also the Lamb who is also the great Shepherd, who shares the adoration of all of heaven in John's vision. What is different is the reception. It is as if all the hostility of worldly, unbelieving people gets divinely recycled, multiplied and turned into the exact opposite -- dishonour into honour, negativity into praise, power games into kingdom faith. If we have made Jesus our Saviour and our Lord, the Jesus we carry with us is worthy of the very highest of high esteem. When people get a little glimpse of who He is, and believe, there's a setting free that occurs, and an impartation (through us) of the Spirit of Jesus. The kingdom of God is poised and distributed and more ready to bring God's kingdom order, than we are ready to be the bringers of it.

QUESTION Negativity, unbelief, religious prejudice – we know we will encounter these attitudes. How, with the Lord's help, do we face into what is hostile?

PRAYER Lord Jesus, we love You and we want our world around to know You and love You, too. Empower us, like Peter, to know the partnership we have, and have the courage the Holy Spirit gives, to step out with You when you nudge us to. Amen.

Lamb is closely associated with God. The word used for 'temple' in Revelation is the one that is used for the temple proper, not the precincts, in other words the place where God dwells – served, not by one tribe (Levites) but by all believers, made priests in God's service.

• **For further study** on priestly worship in the New Covenant, Rev. 1:6, 5:10, 20:6; 3:12, 22:3.

16 'Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst.

The sun will not beat down on them,' nor any scorching heat.

17 For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their Shepherd;

'He will lead them to springs of living water.'

'And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'

Martyrs and other deceased believers are depicted as desert travellers who have found rest, shade and fresh water while they await their resurrection and persecutors' demise, as foretold by Isaiah.

• **For further study** of promises for God's own people, now received by His people of all nations, see Isaiah 25:4-8, Isaiah 49:6,10

Revised Common Lectionary readings for **May 12** (Easter 4) in Bible order

Prepare for Sunday by reading the Bible passages beforehand – read again to reflect on Sunday's teaching

Theme Three viewpoints show who Jesus is

John 10:22-30 – Jesus begins to reveal that He and the Father are One

Acts 9:36-43 – Peter invites the Holy Spirit to raise Tabitha from dead

Revelation 5:11-14 – He who overcame sin's power receives heaven's praise

Read also: Psalm 23

John 10:22-30 – Jesus begins to reveal that He and the Father are One

He was teaching at the Festival of Lights in Solomon's Colonnade.

22-23 Then came the Festival of Dedication [Hanukkah] at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was in the temple courts walking in Solomon's Colonnade.

"Festival of Dedication" – the Jewish Festival of Lights in December celebrates the re-dedication of the Temple (and lighting again of the menorah lights) in 164 BC following its desecration by the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes.

Temple courts – the Temple proper had large-scale covered colonnades surrounding the central courtyard on all sides. Solomon's Colonnade on the east side (thought to have some original stonework) gave the best shelter from cold weather – and was also where the early church gathered for teaching, meeting in homes also.

24 The Jews who were there gathered around Him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If You are the Messiah, tell us plainly."

"Tell us plainly" – on one level, they wanted clarity owing to the different ideas that existed about the Messiah. On a more sinister level, some wanted a statement that would incriminate Him. Jesus had not affirmed His Messiahship except to the

Samaritan woman by the well, John 4:25-26. His teaching, miracles and manner of life gave a clear answer, but not one for which He could be persecuted.

25-26 Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I do in My Father's name testify about Me, but you do not believe because you are not My sheep.

"Not My sheep" – then, as now, many did not believe in Him, not because they do not have the information or the evidence; some initial faith is needed.

27 My sheep listen to My voice; I know them, and they follow me.

"Listen to My voice" – perhaps "hear My voice" would be better. A mindset closed to "being of His flock", perhaps because simple faith does not satisfy our religious preconceptions, will not "get" Jesus or find it easy to listen to Him.

28 I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of My hand.

"Eternal life" – the gift Christ brings to all who turn to Him and believe Him, to receive the gift.

• **For further study**, let Jesus explain this in His detailed words to Nicodemus, John 3:1-21,

in which he alludes to a prophecy by Ezekiel familiar to Nicodemus. "Water" in this context cannot be symbolic baptism.

"Never perish" – even stronger in the Greek. The security of the sheep is in the all-powerful shepherd, who will never allow a violent snatch to occur.

29 My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; no one can

snatch them out of My Father's hand.

30 I and the Father are one."

"One" – not one person but "one thing" in Greek construction. One in essence and nature, will and purpose, but not identical persons. This profound truth is what lies behind Jesus' "I am" declarations in John, "Bread of Life", "Good Shepherd", "The Way, the Truth and the Life" etc.

IN PRACTICE As Jesus is revealed more and more for who He is, the Messiah or Christ, anointed one of God, two kingdom orders become prominent. One is the kingdom of God – God's order and rule of all that is just and good. Earlier, standing under the festival lights in the same colonnade He had (almost certainly) gestured to them as He said, with emphasis, "I am the Light of the World!" The other kingdom that becomes evident is the kingdom of darkness. It is the rule of the one who is master of all that is hurtful, hateful and twisting of truth, as we see played out in Jesus' arrest, trial and execution. More of Jesus revealed often produces more darkness – more kickback, at least as a reaction. That's when it is important to know who we are in Christ, secure in the Father's hand and with His authority behind our prayerful stand.

QUESTION *Is it fair that we cannot know Jesus and His kingdom until we believe in Him and receive Him? Why isn't there a free trial period?*

Acts 9:36-43 – Peter invites the Holy Spirit to raise Tabitha from the dead

The ministry of Jesus is seen through Peter, just as before the Ascension.

36 In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas); she was always doing good and helping the poor.

"Tabitha... Dorcas" – Tabitha in Aramaic and Dorcas in Greek both mean 'gazelle'.

37 About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room.

"Body was washed" – it was usual to prepare for burial without delay. In Jerusalem the burial had to take place the same day. Outside Jerusalem a day or two might be allowed.

38 Lydda was near Joppa; so when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, "Please come at once!"

"Sent two men to him" – Peter was staying nearby. Even in this coastal place, two days journey from Jerusalem, people knew of the Holy Spirit's power present with the apostles, and not giving up hope, they knew who they should call.

39 Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them.

40 Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up.

"Tabitha, get up" – His words were almost identical to the words Jesus spoke to Jairus' daughter, Mark 5:41

41 He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called for the believers, especially the widows, and presented her to them alive.

"Presented her... alive" – her resurrection was to complete her earthly life, but it would have reminded the other believers of their promised resurrection in Christ.

42 This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord.

"Many people believed" – as they do when they

can see the Lord at work. This is part of the pattern of miracles leading to life-changing conversions as people receive the gospel and the Lord.

43 Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon.

"A tanner" – Peter broke a cultural barrier. Tanners dealt with the skins of dead animals and as an occupation it was considered unclean. It was also a smelly trade. Simon probably found himself less than welcome at the local synagogue.

IN PRACTICE The focus of the story is on Tabitha, and on Peter, but who reveals Himself? Peter, whose card was marked a lot less than perfect, was the bringer of the presence of Jesus. He looked like Peter. He sounded like Peter. But His working was unmistakably the working of the Lord Jesus. What does that teach us about Jesus being revealed to our sceptical world? Who brings Him to situations, speaks his words, imparts His blessing and expects his results? If you and I find the 'risk assessment' uncomfortably great, how does Jesus reach people then?

PRAYER Lord Jesus, help me to grow in awareness of the many 'ordinary' people and situations I encounter each day, and to be more alert to something extraordinary you may be purposing to do – even with me speaking Your words or bringing some other blessing.

Revelation 5:11-14 – He who overcame sin's power hears heaven's praise

A countless multitude praise God for His gift of salvation

9 After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.

"A great multitude" – a countless, multiethnic throng which v.14 tells us have come out of great suffering to be promoted to heavenly acclaim because of their belonging to Jesus, identified with Him through the Cross and His shed blood.

10 And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

"Salvation belongs to... God" – affirming and agreeing that salvation is God's initiative, not the result of man's efforts.

11-12 All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, saying:

"Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"

"Praise and glory..." – A praise stanza given by all the angels, the elders and the four living creatures. Its seven parts denote completeness, total praise; very similar to the praise of the Lamb recorded by John earlier, Rev. 5:12.