

**Knowing God – Sermon for Sunday 21 May 2023**  
**John 17: 1-11 (Rev Phil Wootton)**

‘This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent’ (John 17: 11). What is it, to know God?

Human beings have been reaching out to know God since before the dawn of history. I watched a fascinating archaeology programme the other day about what they dubbed ‘underwater Stonehenge.’ It was the discovery of a stone circle in the sea, a place called Atlit Yam on the coast of Israel. It’s reckoned to have been put there (when it was still dry land) over 9000 years ago, making it twice as old as ‘our’ Stonehenge. Stone circles were erected across the Neolithic era, and although we can’t know their exact meaning, these stones can’t possibly have any practical function as we’d understand it. They must be some form of religion. They demonstrate that human beings always been reaching out to know the divine since our earliest existence times. By the alignment of the stones, we can tell this reaching out was connected with sunrise or sunset – they were looking to the skies. Such ideas are reflected in the Psalms: ‘The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day, they pour forth speech; night after night, they display knowledge’ (Psalm 19: 1-2).

God writes his character into his creation. The knowledge of God is communicated through the world – the universe – he has made. The problem is, that communication without words is open to misinterpretation. As soon as we have religious artefacts surviving, we see them being used for idolatry. Another Psalm, 115, condemns such idols made of silver and gold: ‘They have mouths but cannot speak; eyes, but cannot see. They have ears but cannot hear; noses, but they cannot smell. They have hands, but cannot feel; feet, but they cannot walk... Those who make them shall become like them, and so will all who trust in them’ (Psalm 115: 5-8). Don’t confuse the maker with what has been made. Humans also have a proclivity for telling stories about these so-called gods, ascribing to them all-too human attributes. The pantheon of the ancient Greeks and Romans contain gods who are proud, jealous, capricious, argumentative and angry. Nature worship leads to gods in the image of man!

Although we see God in nature, it doesn’t work simply to know God through nature: we mess it up too much. We need to know God also through revelation, and that’s what the Bible gives us – not a simple picture, nor a set of doctrinal statements, but a story. This story is long and complicated. It’s a story of God who seeks and searches out his people; who longs and loves and liberates. Psalm 139 sums it up: ‘O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.’

The true matter is much less about our human search to know God; it is God’s reaching out to be known by us. ‘In many and various ways God has spoken to our forefathers through the prophets, but in these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son’ (Hebrews

1: 1-2). 'The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation' (Colossians 1: 15). Truly to know God, we need to know his Son who is the revelation of God in human form.

But we still need to be careful. Just as humans made gods in our own image, so its easy to re-imagine Jesus in our image too. For example, some scholars thought Jesus' miracles were all too fantastical, so they embarked on what they called the quest for 'the historical Jesus.' The trouble was, when they stripped away all what they thought to be extra trappings added by the Gospel-writers, what they came up with was their own Western liberal scholarly faces looking back at themselves. There is no other Jesus than the one the Gospels show us: we need to seek to know him.

There is a difference between knowing someone and knowing about someone; between knowing them by reputation, and knowing them in person. You hear many cases of meeting a famous person and finding them nothing like you'd imagined. Maybe physical: 'You're smaller than you look on TV.' Or personality: 'I just laugh and laugh when she's on stage, but she was really miserable when I met her.' Or, 'He sounds so forthright in his speeches, but in person he was full of doubt and uncertainty.' I am convinced that Jesus is utterly consistent, although I am sure there'll be things about him we have got wrong. But the gift of the Holy Spirit means we don't have to wait to meet him: we can know him now spiritually (although we can't see him physical). Although the experience is so different for different people, and not everyone is gifted with any sure experience, nevertheless knowing Jesus happens now. It can be in a formal context like prayer, worship or the Eucharist; or informally when we're on our own or with others; it can happen quietly or noisily; it can be in a sacred or a secular space, outdoors or indoors. There are no rules, because it is God through Jesus by the Spirit who reaches out to us.

And that encounter is eternal life: it starts now. It's not this world or the next. This is not an either/or; it's both/and. It's a foretaste now of what one day will be in full. The knowledge of God through Jesus by the Spirit extends from that moment of encounter through however much or little of this life remains to us on earth into the world to come. It might be experienced as love that fills your being, or peace that flows through, or joy that bubbles over, or challenge that addresses your whole life. The experience might only be for a moment, but it seems to cross barriers or dimensions, and reach into eternity.

Jesus prayed that the Father will glorify him as his actions glorify the Father. The glory is reached through what to the outsider might be considered the opposite – demeaning, shameful. Through the self-emptying by which Jesus took flesh; through his suffering ignominiously and dying shamefully; to his rising gloriously and exaltation wondrously – all is included in the glory he receives at the Father's hand. To see this glory of God and his Christ is to be given eternal life. Eternal life is not so much everlasting life as it is personal knowledge of God who is the everlasting One. And that is what human beings are made for – to know the one true God, and Jesus Christ who he has sent.