

Knowing God

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 10th May 2026 at St John the Baptist Church, Aldenham

Reading(s): Acts 17: John 14: 15- 21

Introduction: Knowing God

When I read the two readings we've heard this morning I realised that what I should preach about is knowing God. And I've got several questions for you to consider. Here's the first:

Who are the most important people in your life?

Probably the most important people for children would be their parents, then brothers or sisters, or friends. For adults it might be a husband or wife, children, or close friends. For some, a work colleague is a really important person to you.

Moving on from that, here's my second question:

What famous person would you like to meet?

I met Prince Philip, father of King Charles. But I can't say I knew him personally.

Who do you think is the most famous person who ever lived?

I think it must be Jesus. Here's my big question for you: do you think you can know Jesus personally? You can't see him, but the Bible says that he came back to life after he was crucified, that he ascended to heaven and that when he said goodbye to his disciples he said "I am with you always"¹.

Here's my next question:

¹ Matthew 28:20

Who is God?

Let's go back for a moment to our first reading from the book of Acts. Here we see St Paul talking to people in Athens about God. Who here has been to Athens? Have you visited the Areopagus? I used to think when I read this story that it was another building in Athens, but when I visited Athens I found out that it was a little hill – what you'd call a rocky outcrop even – an open-air space where philosophers used to meet to talk about the meaning of life, how to understand the world, and how we should live. Earlier in chapter 17 it says that while Paul was waiting for his friends to join him in Athens he spent time chatting to people in the market-place, and they invited him to go with them to the Areopagus to tell them about what he believed.

Usually when Paul arrived in a city he would go to the synagogue and talk to fellow-Jews. He does go to the synagogue in Athens. But here in this passage he is speaking to people who didn't believe in the Jewish God. The Greeks believed in a great number of gods, male and female, who all had their own stories and personalities. Some of them were not very nice. The chief of the gods, Zeus, was a very self-centred person indeed. Some of the stories about what he did are not suitable to talk about with children present!

Anyway, Paul starts off his speech by saying that he can see the people of Athens are very religious – they have so many temples for different gods. And he mentions one altar he had seen inscribed "To an unknown god". This gives Paul a good starting point for what he wants to say. It's the kind of thing

preachers love to find to engage their audience – a “hook” that engages people with the message they want to give.

Paul then comes out with this bold statement: “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”² In other words, “I’m going to tell you about the God you don’t know.”

Paul then goes on to talk about the God he believes in. God is the creator of the universe, far too great to live in a man-made temple. He doesn’t need anything from us, in fact the opposite is true – we need him because he gives us life and everything else. But more than this, God wants a relationship with us – he always wanted people to search for him and find him. And, of course, now in Jesus, God has come down to us and revealed who he is. So we can know *about* God through his creation and through Jesus.

This brings me to my last question:

Can we know God personally?

What do you think? If God is so big, so powerful that he made the universe, and we are so small, could it really be possible to have a personal relationship with him? To be able to say “I know God” – not “I know *about* God,” but “I know God *personally*”?

Well, I believe that it is possible – in fact, I know it is, because I can say that I do know God personally. He has had his hand on my life all along, and has graciously allowed me to feel his love and sense his presence. I’ve never seen God or Jesus, but when I talk to him I know he is listening, and often I feel him

² Acts 17:23 NRSV

around me and inside me. This often happens when I pray alone, or when I am worshipping God in church. And I'm trying to get to know him better by spending more time with him.

Last Sunday George and I went to a church in Royston, where our son and daughter-in-law live, and during the sermon I felt God. I felt very emotional, and tears were rolling down my cheeks. The sermon was about Jesus being our shepherd, and the vicar said that we too could be shepherds to other people. I was reminded of the words that Jesus spoke to Peter after he rose from the dead, when he asked him to look after his sheep for him. He meant that he wanted Peter to look after Jesus' other followers, to be the leader of the church. As I thought about this, I knew that God was speaking to me also about looking after people here at Aldenham. It's a big responsibility, and all the more so because the people here are Jesus' sheep.

So my answer to my question is Yes, we can know God personally.

So how can we know God personally?

If we want to know God for ourselves, I think there are three things that need to happen:

1. We need to believe that God loves us. How can we know this? First of all, it says it in the Bible. Secondly, Jesus was willing to die on the Cross to forgive all of our sins – that's a pretty big sign that he loves us! As Jesus himself said, "The greatest love you can have for your friends is to give

your life for them.”³ When we celebrate Holy Communion, we are remembering that Jesus gave his body and his blood for us.

2. We need to decide to follow Jesus. This means saying sorry for the things we have done wrong, receiving his forgiveness and promising to love him and live the way he wants us to. As Jesus said in today’s gospel reading. “If you love me, you will obey my commandments.”⁴ Jesus loves us, and wants us to love him too, and show by making him the most important person in our lives. You may have made that decision already. Tomorrow is the anniversary of my confirmation, when I promised to follow Jesus for the rest of my life. Confirmation is a public way of deciding to follow Jesus, but you can do it on your own by just saying a prayer of commitment.
3. We need to receive the Holy Spirit. This is what Jesus was talking about in our reading today:
“I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, who will stay with you forever. He is the Spirit, who reveals the truth about God. The world cannot receive him, because it cannot see him or know him. But you know him, because he remains with you and is in you.”⁵
When we decide to follow Jesus, God sends his Holy Spirit into our hearts. The Holy Spirit helps us to know for ourselves that God loves us, and guides our thoughts so that we start thinking the way Jesus would. He helps us be

³ John 15:13 GNB

⁴ John 14:15 NRSV and GNB

⁵ John 14:16-17 GNB

strong when we are afraid or when we're tempted to do or say something wrong. You can ask the Holy Spirit to fill you every day. It's a good thing to do at the beginning of a day.

Let me summarise what I've just said. If we want know God for ourselves there are 3 things that need to happen:

1. We need to believe that God loves us.
2. We need to decide to follow Jesus and show our love for him.
3. We need to receive the Holy Spirit.

These are the basic features of being a Christian, otherwise known as a disciple of Jesus.

Making it personal

Now I'm guessing that there are probably three kinds of people here today. Some of us here will be quite sure that we know God in this way. Some of us may have been coming to church for a long time but we don't feel very close to God. For others, this business of knowing God personally may be a whole new idea.

The Bible shows us that God is looking to have a relationship with us. It's important to him that we should want this too. God knows us very well – he sees us, he hears us, he even knows what we're thinking. He really would like all of us to get to know him better.

So wherever you're at in your journey of faith, let me give you an opportunity for you to ask God to help you move forward in your relationship with him, if you'd like to do that. It

doesn't matter where you are in your journey of faith, there will be something for you in this prayer – just connect with whatever suits you at this moment. I'll leave some pauses to give you space to reflect.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we are amazed at your greatness and power in creating this beautiful universe and the wonderful world we live in. We're also amazed that you could love each of us so much that you sent Jesus into the world to show us more about who you are. *Pause*

Lord Jesus, thank you so much for dying for us on the Cross, and showing how much you love each of us. Thank you for the gift of your Holy Spirit to live in each person who decides to follow you. *Pause*

Now, if you'd like to, you can say this prayer of decision after me, silently in your heart. For someone here, this could be the first time you've said a prayer like this. For others, this could be a re-commitment of your life to Christ:

Lord Jesus, I'm sorry for all the wrong things I have done, or said or thought. Please forgive me. I would like to know you better, love you with all my heart and follow you day by day. Please fill me now with your Holy Spirit. *Pause*

Help me to be aware of you every day, wherever I am. Help me to know deep down that you love me, even when I go wrong and let you down. Help me to pray to you every day and grow in faith. Amen.

If you'd like to learn more about how to know God for yourself, please speak to me or send me an e-mail, and I'll

make sure we can fix up a time to have a chat about where you are on your journey of faith.