

Knowing God by Knowing Jesus

Sermon for the Patronal Festival of St Philip & St James
Sunday 5 May 2019

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

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Isaiah 30: 18-21; Psalm 19: 1-6; 1 Corinthians 15: 1-8; John 14: 6-14

+In the Name of God: Father, Son & Holy Spirit. AMEN.

I take my lead from some words of Jesus in today's Gospel, addressed to Philip our parish patron, who was obviously having some sort of agnostic moment: "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." (John 14: 9) And also some words from the Archbishop of Canterbury about five back, Michael Ramsey, words that I want you to remember: God is Christlike, and in him there is no un-Christlikeness at all.

Where do we go to find God, and what must we do to know God? What might it *mean* to know God, to meet God? I remember Captain Kirk in *Star Trek* once meeting an alien force that said it was God, and Kirk demanded proof. So do a lot of sceptics that you and I have met.

Their God, that is, the one they don't believe in, is a matter of empirical proof, of evidence. And just because the Bible and pious religious conservatives point to miracles, they can never be enough to convince a sceptic (as David Hume taught). The Christian tradition is a rational one; we like to think of God as the underlying principle that makes our universe understandable, reliable, livable. Yet the same sceptics rightly point to how reason can let us down—the so-called dialectic of Enlightenment—and how many versions of reason are now competing in today's post-modern marketplace of ideas. Faith in scientific rationality is even deserting us these days, as the climate wars make plain. We prefer reality television and unreality science, which means that we don't prefer reality at all. Many people hold on to God as a principle of practical reason, too—a principle undergirding morality and providing reliable wisdom for living—but which God are they referring to, and especially when different religions and moral codes really are different?

The best sermon I've ever heard in my life was on this whole subject, when I was a theological student in Brisbane in my early twenties, attached to the university parish, Christ Church St Lucia, for my pastoral placement. The Rector was Fr David Richardson, who became my mentor and later a colleague, Dean of Adelaide then of Melbourne, more recently Director of the Anglican Centre in Rome. Anyway, his sermon was at the service of Tenebrae, where in a

darkened church the lights on a seven-candle candelabra are extinguished one by one, until only one candle remains, the one representing Jesus Christ. David traced the decline of faith in the modern West, how one authority we once trusted after another have been extinguished—in science, in philosophy, in divine providence called into question by twentieth-century horrors—until only one reliable ground of faith in God for modern Western people remains, Jesus Christ himself. I was in tears by the end of this sermon. It helped guide me to my doctoral work on the uniqueness and finality of Jesus in late-twentieth century theology, and not only my subsequent theological research but also the convictions that have always underpinned my priestly ministry and especially my preaching. The theme, the content, the rationale and the goal for me are all Jesus Christ, simple as that.

To fundamentalists with their angry God, I counter pose the nonviolent God we meet in Jesus Christ. To happy clappers with their certain feeling of God's presence, I counter pose the darkness of Gethsemane and Calvary, and the not-knowing of Easter Saturday, as a necessary expression of God's hiddenness.

And to those of a more philosophical turn of mind, who find God in the light of reason, I counter pose the necessity of living with Christ in the Holy Spirit, through the liturgical fellowship of Christians,

which is the way God's darkness starts to reveal patterns and colours and forms, as our lives and our imaginations are slowly and surely transformed. That way we become people who pay attention to where God is, not to where God isn't, and to who God is, not to who God isn't. Because neither the fundamentalists or the atheists can get beyond God reduced to an argument, to an assertion, to a principle, whether or not they believe it, and hence they miss the way God is actually revealed. And that's in all the ways that make us human: in the flesh, in the imagination, in the argy-bargy and the reconciliation of community living, in the alignment of present feeling with tried and true experience.

In particular, it comes in the form of what French thinker Jean-Luc Marion calls a saturated phenomenon—a powerful event that can neither be denied or adequately accounted for. So the revelation of God is more like being swept up in a beautiful piece of music, or being bedazzled by a compelling work of art, or being stunned by an extraordinary insight in poetry or prose, or falling in love—or being confronted by a human face and sensing a claim on us that's absolute (as the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas taught).

Friends, speaking about Jewish philosophers, the psalmist today knows that the beauty and wonder and reliable order of nature do speak powerfully of God, though you don't need Richard Dawkins to

tell you that this isn't a matter of proof. Isaiah commends God's faithfulness to us today, despite the reality of national suffering and a plain sense of God's absence, using the language and imagery of God's past faithfulness in Zion, to the people of God's own choosing—a God of justice who came through reliably in past times. In other words, Isaiah reconnects Israel with its defining narrative, because in the ongoing ritual reinforcement of that narrative, new generations are persuaded by the reality of God.

In our epistle today, St Paul gives us a short, sharp summary of the Christian good news about God. It too takes the form of narrative, recounting historical events and the experiences of Christians since that first Easter, into which Paul declares himself to have been grafted, as one untimely born. And this engrafting as a witness is key to how Christians meet God in Jesus Christ. Through being caught up with the risen Christ among his people, as Paul was, the penny dropped. I can't help thinking that the witness of Christians who Paul used to harass and lock up, and worse, finally got under his skin. His dealings with Christians as their persecutor no doubt helped open his eyes to Jesus Christ as a living reality—as the Franciscan Rule reminds us (Ch. XII), “All the Friars ... should preach by their deeds.”

Finally, in our Gospel today, our man Philip is told that he's been looking in the wrong place for the Father. Jesus is God with us, the

human face of God; ours is the Christlike God, in whom there is no un-Christlikeness at all. But wait, there's more. We mustn't make a characteristic modern mistake in thinking that Jesus is just back then, as a moral exemplar or a wisdom teacher whose words and influence reach out to us across a barrier of history through the words of scripture and liturgy and through pious memory alone. Rather, Jesus is a going concern and a living reality into whose life we're drawn, which is the very life of God. Our Eucharist is not simply a memorial!

Here is the lived conviction of Christians going right back to the start. It's the Trinitarian mystery—of the giver, the gift and the giving. Yet it's one divine disclosure. And we can't grasp it from the outside. It doesn't give itself to the idle observer, let alone the inattentive hanger-on. We can't reduce God to an observable reality or encompass God within a larger rational framework. No, we Christians encounter Jesus in the here and now when we ourselves come to do the works that Jesus does, as promised to Philip in today's Gospel. That's how the reality of Jesus conveys the reality of God the Father, through the Holy Spirit in the lived experience of Holy Church. That's how we come to see the Father, the Christlike God in whom there is no un-Christlikeness at all: in the Church where God's revelation in the flesh continues as a living reality—not at the expense of evidence, not at the expense of rationality, not at the expense of feeling, but stretching and correcting all these faculties. That's how

the one remaining candle left to us in today's difficult conditions for faith can still be light for the world.

The Lord be with you ...