

Philip, James and Knowing God

Sermon for St Philip and St James, Apostles and Martyrs, 2 May 2021

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 the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

I take as my text some words from today's Gospel: "Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?'" (John 14: 9a)

When a priest is ordained in our Church the candidate must publicly answer a series of questions from the bishop, one of which is this: "Will you be ready, both in your public and private ministry, to oppose and set aside teaching that is contrary to God's word?" Having answered "I will by God's grace", and in light of our Prime Minister's public testimony this week about his Pentecostal faith, I'm going to do just that.

Our Prime Minister represents a form of Protestant Christianity with a black and white, or dualistic, view of reality. God is locked in combat with the evil one— Pentecostals call it spiritual warfare. God's forces on earth are Spirit-filled believers identifiable by plain signs of God's favour in their lives, such as prosperity and success. Which must mean that God's favour is less evident if at all in the lives of poor or unsuccessful people, while being completely absent from inner-city intellectuals. Moreover, God has apparently called our Prime Minister to his office, mounting up on wings like eagles and positioned to do God's work.

Our Prime Minister tells us that the evil one is furthering a left-wing agenda of identity politics via social media, which is aimed at destroying society. No mention of how far-right social media thrives on angry conspiracist insanity, let alone no acknowledgement of minor concerns like gendered violence, structural racism or the fossil fuel fundamentalism that makes less and less economic sense while it courts a dire climate future. Perhaps Jesus will return and take the

Pentecostals home with him to heaven before 2050, so that our Prime Minister needn't worry about emissions targets.

Friends, there's a different story in our readings today about who God is, how God guides us, and what God's like. It's present, too, in the apostolic faith that we hand on in our Catholic tradition, and that we celebrate in the gracious alternative reality of our Eucharist.

First of all, it's not black and white, it's not spiritual warfare. Today's psalm portion gathers the heavens and their starry powers into the embrace of Israel's God—powers that were once worshipped and feared in the ancient near East but no longer. This psalm passage makes particular reference to the sun, which was of course worshipped by Israel's oppressors the Egyptians, but here it takes its place among the creatures of Israel's God—a gift of light and warmth, and for stably guiding the seasons, hence not at all to be feared or placated. That's what believing in God as creator entails: being able to live at peace in a stable and reliable world, free of things that go bump in the night.

And look too at our Isaiah reading today, which comes from a time of national ordeal under a foreign power. It's meant to sustain confidence in Israel's God when all the marks of success and prosperity were in doubt. You can imagine this text encouraging and challenging Christians in Nazi-occupied Paris, or our small Anglican community in Myanmar today. The message is that God remains present and faithful to God's promises, despite evidence apparently to the contrary, and that if we remember that, if we trust God to guide and sustain us, then we won't be disappointed. Then we won't be consumed in the to-and-fro of confusion, turning to the right and then to the left, but we'll find a settled confidence. We won't succumb to fever dreams and rivalries and all the things that flourish if we believe in spiritual warfare. God can be trusted, so we needn't become overdramatic and anxiously self-justifying.

And so, we come to our man Philip in today's Gospel. It's good to see that even the saints have a way to go in understanding God properly, as we see with Jesus' gentle but

unmistakeable challenge to Philip. The point here is, as Archbishop Michael Ramsey put it and as Fr Martin reminded us recently, that God is Christlike, and in him is no un-Christlikeness at all.

Who is God, show us the Father, what's God like, how do we know God? The Christian answer is that we know God the Father through Jesus Christ—through his life, his cross, his resurrection. The Gospels are all about testifying to this reality, establishing it with every historical and imaginative resource. The Epistles are about this apostolic faith taking root in the earliest Churches, with misunderstandings constantly challenged and the liberating power of this good news unpacked and celebrated. The creeds and the ancient liturgies that followed live on in the words and actions that animate us here today. And of course, the Church's Eucharist, which is God the Father's continuing gift of God the Son to the Church in God the Holy Spirit, has been the beating heart of our Christian life from the get-go, and we still feel it beating in our chests this morning.

Now, with our Prime Minister's testimony in mind let me set one thing straight. When Jesus says in today's Gospel "If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it", we mustn't conclude that if we believe and pray hard enough God will do whatever we ask. This isn't what it means. Our Prime Minister thinks so, though, having told us years back how he and Jenny prayed for the gift of children in the face of their infertility and miracles followed. Well, Lisa and I prayed the same prayer, and no miracle. This isn't how prayer works. Prayer in Jesus' name has to recognise that God's perspective on our lives and their purpose and their end may not be our perspective. What Jesus is saying here, I think, in the context of today's Gospel, is that he is now the clue to God, the link to God, the presence of God, so that intercession now simply means sitting with our hopes and disappointments and problems in the presence of the one who we know loves us, and who'll never let us go, so that in time our sense of our burdens in life will be transformed, and ourselves too. This realization changes how we pray, and our sense of what we can expect from prayer.

And finally, we mustn't miss our other saint today, St James, who appears among the apostles in our Epistle reading from 1 Corinthians. Here Paul fulfils his apostolic role in handing on the precious tradition of faith in Jesus that he'd received, grounded in the testimony of earlier witnesses like James, who encountered the new reality of resurrection with the other apostles. This is the resurrection that Paul says was revealed to him last of all—as he puts it, to one untimely born. And here Paul speaks for all of us who weren't there at the start but who might as well have been, because the resurrection has caught us up into God through the Church, too, by the Holy Spirit.

Friends, this is the new vision, the new freedom, the new reality that transforms the world as we experience it. It banishes the overheated, overdramatic, overly self-important claims of religious zealots who want to be in God's winners' circle. Because Jesus reveals an entirely different God on Good Friday: dying as one of those who Frantz Fanon called the wretched of the earth, then raised by God at Easter as the centre of a widening circle of freedom and inclusion, with

no winners' circle because there aren't any losers. And so, friends, mean and narrow politics need never get the better of us. Our challenge is to understand this good news and so to live it—a challenge equally for this Scott, as for *that* Scott.

The Lord be with you ...