

Trinity 17, 4th October 2020, Philippians 3:4b-14.

Knowing Jesus

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, my friend Michael has more.

He's worked for decades with people in great distress. He's wise and gentle. He listens deeply. He draws people out of themselves, gets them to face and bear things that were overwhelming them. He radiates peace, and grace, and acceptance; but his insight is as sharp as a knife. It is a surgeon's knife though: never wielded to hurt, but to heal.

Marie on the other hand was the mother of eight children. She kept them all on the straight and narrow at a time when the city was falling apart, when there was chaos and violence all over the place. She kept them safe, and kept them from hating, filled their lives with love. And there were hundreds, thousands of other children, in the classes she taught. She filled their minds and their imaginations with hope and courage. God knows how many she helped to save.

Or what of Brian? He cared for a friend when he was helplessly ill. Years of feeding him, nursing him, wiping him clean from his mess, changing his nappies, day after day after day. He did it all without complaining, and without recognition. I did it, he said, because that's just what you do for friends. I've seldom met a better man.

And yet, says St. Paul. Whatever gains I had. Whatever the truly good and noble and fine things in my life were, I have come to regard them as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

What could it possibly be that makes the good things of our lives, the things we are rightly proud of, look irrelevant?

Paul's answer is *knowing Jesus*. This is the one thing needful, the pearl beyond price. This is what makes it worth leaving everything: your fishing boat, your possessions, your family, everything: the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Or even if, like most Christians, you're never called to actually *leave* those other things, nevertheless, Paul would say, if you don't *know Jesus*, whatever else you have and are is as dust.

So what does knowing Jesus mean? Well, let's clear the low bar first: it does not mean knowing *about* Jesus. As it happens, we can know quite a lot about Jesus historically, with a reasonable degree of certainty. And there are many books about him, but you do not need to read books to know Jesus. Knowing Jesus and knowing *about* Jesus are two very different things.

I remember somebody saying just that when I first went off to study theology. It made me rather cross. I thought on the one hand it was anti-academic and on the other that he was not so subtly implying that I was likely to get the two kinds of knowing confused. That I was good at reading books, but didn't really *know* Jesus. And in fairness, I wasn't sure I did either - at least not in the way we were meant to. Lots of people talked as if Jesus was really right beside them and easy to talk to, invisible yes, but really there, available 24-7 to chat away with. I remember one sermon that said prayer was just like sitting down in your slippers by the fire, nattering with your best friend.

If that is your experience, lucky you, and be very grateful to God. It has never been mine. I can count the number of times I think God has spoken to me in a clear, unambiguous, like someone sitting in front of me kind of way, on three fingers. Three. In four decades. Many better Christians than me, I suspect, have even less. Now, that's not to say that God is not speaking. After all, I'm not very good at listening. But even granted that, I think, the whole thing is much more mysterious, fragmentary and downright difficult than a lot of Christian talk about prayer suggests. Paul himself hints at that often enough. Now we see as if in a glass, darkly, he says. Only then we will know face to face. Now we know only in part. *Then* - at the end - we will know, even as we are fully known.

Knowing language again. It's a fascinating word in the Bible. At the beginning of the Old Testament, in Genesis 4, we read: 'the man *knew* his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore a son.' And then at the beginning of the New, what does Mary say to the Angel Gabriel when he announces she is to have a son? Not the boring modern translation - which at this point is worse than boring, but actually inadequate - 'how can this be, since I am a virgin' but, in the Greek, 'how can this be, since I do not know a man?' In both instances, and across the Bible, knowing means more than being acquainted with. It means, bluntly, sex. Or if that is too much to handle this early in the morning, it means being united with, becoming one with. To know is to love, to share, physically and at the deepest level of being.

If that's right, then knowing Jesus means to be somehow united with Him. Jesus' life and our life are to come together, to flow into each other, even to merge. As Paul puts it, it's no longer just I who live, but Christ who lives in me. He's not the friend outside so much as the fountain within. Maybe, when it comes to prayer, letting the fountain flow is a better image than chatting. Remember that line from the hymn 'Be Thou My Vision', in the last verse: Jesus is called the 'Great Heart of my own heart.' Great heart of my own heart. To pray is knit the hearts together, to let the great flow into the small. That might feel like a chat, but there's no particular reason why it should. So don't feel guilty if it doesn't. And certainly don't let anyone tell you that if it doesn't, you don't have a personal relationship with Jesus, and you're not really Christian. They do not know what they're talking about.

Prayer is about knitting the hearts together, letting the divine fountain rise up within. Nice phrases, but what do they mean? Friends, I give you the Lion King – in other words, last week's sermon. All this is *exactly* what Maxine was talking about, or what St. Paul was talking about in the passage she preached on, Philippians Chapter 2. The divine life rising within is when you start to look like Jesus on the Cross: stretched out, poured out, so that others might flourish. How do you know if someone is really, deeply prayerful? Answer, Philippians 2:3: they 'do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than themselves. They look not to their own interests, but to the interests of others.' That's what it is for the fountain to flow: what Paul means in Philippians 3 to share in his sufferings by becoming like him in his death. Is your life becoming one with his great life of giving away? Is his generosity flowing in your veins? When his death is at work in you, that's when you know that his life is rising, and that finally, finally, you've found the one thing needful. You have, at last, the pearl of great price.

Remember though what comes first. The Gospel is not – be loving. Be humble. Give yourself away. That would be Good Advice, not Good News. No, the Gospel is that there was One who loved, who was humble, who gave himself away, who did all this to the utmost, and in the great trial with death showed that this was the way to life. Who on the Cross and from the Tomb made it so that Love was not only a good idea, but the destiny of the universe. Who, right now, through prayer, through preaching, through baptism and communion is pouring that destiny into you. The Gospel is not – be loving. It is that there is One who will let you love, who will make you like Himself, who will bring you into his beauty.

And when He does so, He will make all that is good about us apart from Him, all that really is good and fine and noble about us now look like well, not quite like *nothing*, but almost nothing. Michael's healing, Marie's mothering, Brian's loving Each one of them truly good, truly beautiful. And yet, each one of them, next to that which is coming, next to that which will be given us - each one of them but a poor matchstick next to the blazing sun.

So let us, like Paul, forget what lies behind, and strain forward to that which lies ahead, the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus, to whom be glory now and forever. Amen.