

“GETTING TO KNOW YOU”
Hebrews 1:1,2

When I used to live in London and drive out into Hertfordshire to work every morning, I'd always listen to the *Capital Radio* Breakfast Show. They had a feature on there in which people would write or 'phone in with messages for other people whom they admired from afar, in the hope that contact could be arranged. The messages went along the lines of: "I stand at the bus stop on the corner of Church Lane every day and a beautiful dark-haired woman drives past in a red Cortina at about 7.30am. She always gives me a smile and I was wondering if she'd like to meet me sometime", or: "I always buy my Daily Mail at the little kiosk opposite East Finchley tube station, but I've never had the courage to speak to the hunky man selling doughnuts from the van next to it. I'm the girl with long auburn hair and the green duffle coat. Say hello to me tomorrow." That kind of thing. There's a kind of inbuilt need in human beings to relate to one another: these listeners had seen someone they wanted to get to know, and this was one way of doing it. Why someone who is nervous about talking to one stranger should have no qualms about telling several hundred thousand radio listeners about it always beat me, but there you go!

As human beings, we also have an innate desire to get to know God as well, I believe. Some people suppress that desire. Others express it in other ways. Many – probably even some of you here this morning – really do wish you could discover a bit more about God, you'd like to be able to relate to him more closely than you feel you're doing right now. It might be a bit of a scary prospect, as making contact obviously was for many of those contributors to the radio show, but you're willing to have a go. Even your attendance here in church betrays something of that desire.

The wonderful thing about God, though – as opposed to the woman driving the Cortina or the doughnut vendor – is that he is also trying to make contact with you. In fact, he has always been trying to communicate with us, always trying to contact us. Ever since humanity took it into their heads to walk away from him and do their own thing – we'd probably call it "sinning" – God has desperately tried to reach out to us, to demonstrate his love and concern for us. The apostle Paul told the Christians in Rome that creation itself was a means of God trying to show himself to humanity (*Romans 1:20*): and he said to the Greek philosophers on Mars Hill in Athens that God was, if you like, leaving hefty clues around the place to lead us to him (*Acts 17:27*).

"*In the past*", as the writer of this letter to the Hebrew Christians begins his first sentence, God actually spoke to our ancestors through particularly receptive and specially gifted men and women – people whom we have come to call "*prophets*". These were not automatons or simply mouthpieces whom God used to speak his words, but people who listened to what they believed God was saying and relayed those messages to their listeners in specific places at specific points in history. Their messages were communicated in all kinds of ways, just as the specifics of the messages were also very different. So we hear the cries of the prophets against social injustice, against sexual immorality, against idolatry and unfaithfulness. We hear then calling God's people to holiness and urging repentance of all peoples, even the enemies of God's people in Nineveh. We hear of God's love and of his judgement, of his patience and of his anger.

Just as the *content* of God's messages to his wayward creation is varied, so was the *method* of communication. Some prophets acted out their message – as did Ezekiel and Hosea. Some preached in market places and palaces – such as Jonah and Isaiah. For some, poetry was their preferred medium; for others, prose; for others, such as Habakkuk for example, it was the convention of courtroom debate. There were riddles and metaphors, visions and rants, questions and pleadings. But they were all God's words, all his means of trying to make contact with the sinful humanity he so loved and so longed to see restored to their original relationship of love and trust with him.

From time to time the prophets were successful: the behaviours and lifestyle of their listeners would be modified for a while, they would regain their own desire to speak to God, to worship him. But it never lasted very long. And because the prophets were still human themselves, they never really got to give the complete picture. Their description of God and their analysis of his ways was always going to be partial and incomplete. No human being could fully communicate all that there was to communicate about God. No-one could ever really understand his message.

So God tired a different tack. In the end, “*in these last days*”, he sent his Son, Jesus the Christ, into the maelstrom of this world in order to speak in a different way. Supremely, God spoke to us through Jesus. This was, if you like, his final revelation, his last attempt to draw us to himself. Whereas the picture of God given through the prophets was incomplete and ultimately unsatisfactory, the way in which God communicated through Jesus was, literally, the last word in communication. The gospel writer, John, probably expressed this idea of Jesus as the “Word” of God more memorably than anyone else, when he wrote of the “*Word made flesh*”, the incarnation of God and the expression of all that he had to say.

The fifteenth century French writer Francois Rabelais (a wonderfully hearty and very committed Christian, by the way), wrote a series of books about the adventures of a giant called Gargantua and his travelling band of companions. It’s an amazingly surreal romp through all the different kinds of comic writing that we more or less take for granted today, a kind of Monty Python before its time. In one episode, the friends are sailing through a snowstorm and blown on the wind are great frozen chunks of words and noises. A battle has been taking place elsewhere and it has been so cold on the battlefield that all the words have frozen. They’re blown away and eventually shatter on the masts and against the side of Gargantua’s ship. As they shatter, the sounds are released and the sailors hear a great jumble of sounds and voices from the distant battle.

In a sense, that is what Jesus was. (Now, it’s just an illustration, so don’t go building any great theologies on this!) He was God, frozen, solidified in human form. And as he burst on to our earth, squawling and whimpering in the blood and mess of the Bethlehem stable, so God’s words roared out of him – and everyone who wanted could hear what God had to say. As he grew, the authority of God became apparent to everyone – inspiring faith and loyalty in some, and fear and hatred in others. But it was God’s word, God’s means of speaking to a world that was “*harassed and helpless, like a flock of sheep without a shepherd.*”

Whereas the prophet Ezekiel had only been able to hint at God’s glory (*Ezekiel 1:28; 3:23*), Jesus radiated it. He is, according the writer of this letter, “*the radiance of God’s glory*”. Some versions translate that as a “*reflection*” of God’s glory, but although the Greek word here can sometimes be used to refer to a reflection, it more usually means “*effulgence*”, the actual source of light. In Jesus we see God’s glory, God’s “god-ness”. It radiates out of him. It’s of a completely different order from the thinness of Ezekiel’s description. John begins his retelling of the fantastic vision that is *Revelation* with an account of his encounter with the Risen Lord Jesus. This passage from *Revelation 1:9-17*, and John’s reaction to the sight, certainly communicates something of the one who radiates, rather than reflects God’s glory.

Whereas the prophet Isaiah expounded the holiness of God (*Isaiah 6:1-6; 11:4*) and other prophets gave partial glimpses of his nature, Jesus bore the stamp of that nature, he was “*the exact representation of God’s being*”. Again, knowing the Greek word is helpful. It’s the word meaning an exact copy, an engraving – “*charakter*”. Jesus doesn’t just speak of God: he **is** God. Paul goes to town on that in *Philippians 2:6* and *Colossians 1:15,19*. Jesus himself tells his disciples about it in his last, long conversation with them before his arrest and death (*John 14:9,11*).

Whereas the prophet Jeremiah described the power of God (*Jeremiah 10:12,13*), Jesus himself exercises that power as he sustains the universe. The astounding events of the final battle between Good and Evil, again described by John in *Revelation*, show just how powerful Jesus is. He is the embodiment of the

power of God. This is God-in-the-flesh, all you ever wanted to know about God but were too awestruck to ask.

And in Jesus, his Son and heir, co-creator of the universe, God has spoken. Jesus has brought us the very words of God, has given us in himself the definitive means of getting to know God. But how has he spoken? What's he got that the prophets haven't?

Well, first of all, Jesus has spoken in his **words**. An obvious thing to say, but none the less true for that. In his stories and questions and pronouncements and challenges, the words of God have been uttered. And they are words that are powerful, words that can heal a leprous hands, that can restore sight to a blind eye, that can still a raging storm, that can call a demon from a maniac, that can simultaneously challenge and console a frightened adulteress. God's word never returns to him without accomplishing something – and that is clearly seen in the way Jesus uses words.

But Jesus has also spoken by his **actions**. Remember the Conservative slogan that was used when Ted Heath became Prime Minister? *“Actions not words.”* Jesus lived a life which spoke of God. He pointed men and women to God by the way he lived his life, by the things he did and the things he did not do. He touched the lives of others – literally. He reached out to the marginalised and disadvantaged, the despised and the unloved. He showed in his own actions and attitudes the way that he wanted others to tread.

And he has spoken by his **death**. *“He provided purification for sins”*, we read here. Jesus died, nailed naked to a plank of wood on an exposed hilltop. And as he screamed his final words, God spoke into the mess of human history in the most powerful and compassionate way that anyone has ever spoken. *“It is finished!”* The last word has been spoken. The work is done. The great project has reached completion. The great desire of God to speak to humankind has finally been achieved, the plan for reconciliation is complete. None of the prophets, no other human being could ever have achieved that. Only through the death of his own Son, God in human form, could that ever have happened.

Although that was the definitive word, God has also spoken in Jesus through his **resurrection and ascension**. That great cry from the cross was ratified as Jesus walked from the bursting tomb, as he showed himself to his friends, to the many witnesses who were able to see him, hear him, touch him in those amazing days before he went and *“sat down at the right hand of the majesty in heaven.”*

When I was at university we had a vice-president in the student union. He was the guy who looked after all the student services, such as the bars and ... well, the other bars. He was a Geordie and whenever he spoke at a meeting or other gathering, he would finish with *“That's all I've got to say”*, as if there was no possibility of anyone having anything else to say at all. That's what God says in Jesus – *“That's all I've got to say”* (though I suspect he will not say it with a Geordie accent!). *“In these last days God has spoken to us by his Son.”*

How do you get to know God? How can you communicate with him, listen to him, speak with him? If you want to get to know God, get to know Jesus. Read the stories in the gospels – his own teaching, the account of his life, his stories and sayings. Listen for his voice as you read. Be alive to the possibility of his Holy Spirit speaking into your own situation through what you read.

God put into the hearts of each and everyone of us a desire to know him, to communicate with him. Don't suppress it or attempt to explain it away. Explore what it's all about. And allow Jesus to transform your life as you listen to and speak with him in prayer. It may be that this is all new to you, or that you've heard it all before but never really understood it. If you want to explore it a bit further, then why not join one of our *Alpha* groups? You can come along on Wednesday 10th October to a special meal (all free) and listen for yourself. Have a word with me or with Gail (415110) after the service this morning if you'd like to do that. But whatever you do, don't stop thinking about it.

There's a voice on the radio saying, "I see this person every Sunday. They sit in a seat at Wade Street Church. Sometimes they smile in my direction. Sometimes they even sing love songs to me. I'm not sure they know my name yet. But I want to get better acquainted with them. I could make such a difference to their lives. Perhaps they could contact me. My name is God – and I've been dying to meet them."