

“KNOWING GOD”

Hosea 6:6

As some of you will probably be aware, I have had the privilege of acting as Mayor’s Chaplain for several of the Mayors of Lichfield over the past few years. It’s been informative and entertaining to see what goes on in the corridors of what passes for power in this city, and it’s given me the opportunity of meeting a lot of people I wouldn’t otherwise have met. Very often now, when a particular person’s name is mentioned, I can say, “Oh yes, I know him (or her).” The fact is, though, although I might say that, I don’t really know them. All it means is that I’ve seen the person at a meeting or just exchanged a few pleasantries over a bowl of posh crisps somewhere. I suspect we all have similar experiences where we claim to know people that are really only passing acquaintances.

And that point came home to me with some force when I was reading my Bible last week while away on holiday. At the moment, I’m trying read through the Bible from beginning to end using Eugene Peterson’s excellent paraphrase, *The Message*. His lively translation, although it’s peppered with idioms from his native North America, really is good to read and I’ve often found myself wanting to keep reading on, which is something I’m ashamed to say I’ve never really experienced before. Anyway, I’d got as far as *Hosea*, one of the little books towards the end of the Old Testament in which God’s prophets address his people. It’s a book I’ve read many times before and preached from on several occasions (we actually had a series of sermons on it last autumn) and there are certain verses that stick in your mind anyway, whatever the translation. But this is how Peterson renders *Hosea 6:6*. In the NIV, which we normally use, it says: “*For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings.*” But *The Message* puts it like this: “*I’m after love that lasts, not more religion. I want you to **know GOD**, not go to more prayer meetings*”.

Now, I’d always thought God loved us going to prayer meetings and Bible studies and all the other things that are put on in church for us to go to as a way of declaring our commitment to him. Isn’t that what church is all about? Doesn’t God really bless religious people? Apparently not! In fact, in another of the books of the prophets, this time *Amos 5:21-23*, he says this (and remember, this is God speaking): “*I can’t stand your religious meetings. I’m fed up with your conferences and conventions. I want nothing to do with your religion projects, your pretentious slogans and goals. I’m sick of your fund-raising schemes, your public relations and image making. I’ve had all I can take of your noisy ego-music. When was the last time you sang to me?*”

There are, of course, plenty of other places in the Bible where we learn that God does actually delight in the worship of his people – but only where those people clearly know him and know why they’re doing what they’re doing. Before anything else, God wants us to **know him**. And that is really good advice for us as we get back into routine after the summer break. In many ways, this is like a new year. Like so many other institutions, we have more than one “year” – the calendar year, which starts in January; the liturgical year, which begins with Advent; the financial year, which begins somewhen else; and the year which really follows the academic year, beginnng now. We re-start our programmes of home groups and meetings and events and prayer meetings and sermon series and youth ministry (as we’ve recognised this morning).

And that’s the danger! We re-start our programmes. We get back into **doing** all the things that we think God wants us to do – or, more dangerously, we get back into doing all the things we have always done because once upon a time someone did think that God wanted his people to do them. And somehow, we forget about God himself. Alan Maguire touched on this in what he said last week and Rob Dodd reminded us of it at our Elders’ Meeting on Monday (both of which we confirmations of what we’re saying this morning). As Christians, we are constantly at risk of having too much “religion” and not enough God. Just as I’m tempted to do as Mayor’s Chaplain, we say we know God, but really we’ve only just had brief encounters with him at meetings. Do you really know God? Because if you don’t, it shows. Your religion, however well-intentioned it might be, simply becomes a mask for your own ignorance. And it’s not too difficult for others to see through that mask very often.

There is plenty in the Bible about this – in the New Testament as well as the Old. Our time is limited this morning, so let's just take one example. It's from the other reading we heard earlier, *1 John 4*. Listen to vv7.8 again. The extent to which we know God will be evident in our relationships with one another. If our relationships are wrong, then there's something wrong with the way in which we know God. How on earth can people say they know God, that they love him and want to serve him, when they can't get on with their fellow disciples? How can people come to worship God and as soon as the service is over behave towards other Christians as they so often do – arguing, ignoring, demeaning, gossiping? Perhaps it doesn't actually end up as *Isaiah 58:4* describes it: finishing worship with a big punch-up. (There was an ex-minister in the last church I was in who had laid out one of his deacons on the church steps after a morning service, but that's the only one I know of!) But the attitudes we display towards one another can often be as damaging. How, John says, can such people claim to know God, if they're behaving like that?

As I said, we could have looked at other examples. But they all boil down to the same thing. There's no point calling yourself a Christian, a disciple of Jesus, a follower of God, if you don't actually get to know him. It's what Paul prayed for his converts time and time again in his letters. *"I want you to know God"* – that's the bottom line in all this. Get that right and then you can start sorting out your programmes and meetings. This is how Paul expresses it to the Christians at Ephesus (from *The Message* again): *"I ask – ask the God of our Master, Jesus Christ, the God of glory – to make you intelligent and discerning in knowing him personally, your eyes focused and clear, so that you can see exactly what it is he is calling you to do, grasp the immensity of this glorious way of life he has for Christians, oh, the utter extravagance of his work in us who trust him – endless energy, boundless strength!"*

But we come up against one of our usual problems in all this – our vocabulary. We talk about *"knowing God"*, but how do we actually get to do that? How can we *"know God"*? Well, first off, we need to accept that we will never fully know God – he is just too immense, too awesome, too *other*. He's what the hymn writers call *"ineffable"*. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try and make a start. So here are a few brief pointers.

What's the best way to get to know someone? Talk to them. It's the same with God. **PRAYER** is vital if we are to know him. Prayer is like a conversation. Talk **to** God – thank him for the good things, express your joy, ask him about the bad things, express your anger, your despair, your anxiety. But **listen** to him, too. Take time simply to be quiet and allow God to speak to you. He can communicate with you through your thoughts, through your circumstances, through other people. Don't just talk at God, but listen, too.

And part of that process of listening will involve **READING THE BIBLE**. I've already talked about reading it right through in a lively translation. But there are plenty of other ways and one of the best is to use some daily notes, such as Scripture Union or the Bible Reading Fellowship produce. They are dated materials (so there's a bit of discipline there) with a passage of the Bible and some explanatory notes. God speaks through his Word, so have a go at listening that way. If you want to know more, have a word with me or with Pat Cartmale, who'll order them for you.

You can get to know God, too, through **FELLOWSHIP WITH EACH OTHER**. Everyone has a different story to tell about how God has been at work in their life. Share what he's done in your life and listen to the stories of others. Don't be afraid to talk about God with other Christians. You'll find out even more about him through what he has been up to in their lives.

LOOK AROUND YOU. That's what was at the heart of Paul's prayer for the Ephesian Christians. Look and see what God is doing. Take time to see where he's at work. We sang those words from *Psalms 46* just now – *"Be still and know that I am God."* In our hectic, anxious, busy lives it's good to pause anyway. It's particularly good to pause and reflect on what God is doing. Stop and stare at the sunset. Stand still and listen to the birds (or watch the heron on Minster Pool). Just sit and listen to some music. At the end of the day, sit and think back over where you've seen God at work. Go for a stroll *without your*

mobile 'phone! As Paul writes, "grasp the immensity of this glorious way of life he has for his followers, oh, the utter extravagance of his work in us."

And, of course, keep praying for the **PRESENCE OF HIS HOLY SPIRIT**. The best way to get to know God better is actually to experience him living within you, being part of you and knowing that you are part of him. It's part of the role of the Holy Spirit to make God real to us, to make him *knowable*. Pray this morning that God will touch you with his Spirit, that he will work in your life, that he will make a difference to you. As we've said before, stop **doing** Christian things and start **being** a Christian.

God is not interested, I don't think, in people who *just* turn up for prayer meetings, who just do the programme, who are religious. He's interested in people who want to get to know him better, who want to be at one with him, who want to talk with him and discover what he's doing so that they can tell other people about how exciting it all is. Make that your priority, and then you might find that the prayer meetings and home groups and Sunday services start to get even more exciting – and that life as a whole suddenly starts to buzz. That's the kind of stuff that will keep us going as his people this year. Let's pray that he'll just keep filling us with his Holy Spirit.

Discussion notes on the next page.

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We are tempted to concentrate on **doing** all the things that we think God wants us to do – or, more dangerously, doing all the things we have always done. And somehow, we forget about God himself. As Christians, we are constantly at risk of having too much "religion" and not enough God. We say we know God, but really we've only just had brief encounters with him at meetings. Our religion, however well-intentioned it might be, can simply become a mask for our own ignorance.

To take one example from *1 John 4:7.8*. The extent to which we know God will be evident in our relationships with one another. If our relationships are wrong, then there's something wrong with the way in which we know God. (Look also at *Isaiah 58:4*.)

There's no point calling yourself a Christian, a disciple of Jesus, a follower of God, if you don't actually get to know him. This is how Paul expresses it to the Christians at Ephesus (from *The Message* again): *"I ask – ask the God of our Master, Jesus Christ, the God of glory – to make you intelligent and discerning in **knowing him personally**, your eyes focused and clear, so that you can see exactly what it is he is calling you to do, grasp the immensity of this glorious way of life he has for Christians, oh, the utter extravagance of his work in us who trust him – endless energy, boundless strength!"*

But how do we actually get to do that? How can we "know God"? Well, first off, we need to accept that we will never fully know God, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try and make a start. So here are a few brief pointers.

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READING THE BIBLE. God speaks through his Word, so have a go at listening that way.

FELLOWSHIP WITH EACH OTHER. Don't be afraid to talk about God with other Christians. You'll find out even more about him through what he has been up to in their lives.

LOOK AROUND YOU. Take time to see where he's at work. *"Be still and know that I am God"*

Pray for the **PRESENCE OF HIS HOLY SPIRIT**. The best way to get to know God better is actually to experience him living within you, being part of you and knowing that you are part of him. Stop **doing** Christian things and start **being** a Christian.

Questions for discussion

1. What are the dangers of too much Christian activity?
2. Why do you think we are so intent on *doing* things as Christians?
3. What do you understand by the phrase "knowing God"?
4. How can we listen to God most effectively?
5. Many Christians are not very good at talking about God and his activity with fellow Christians. Why do you think that is? What can be done about it?
6. In what ways can we experience the presence of the Holy Spirit? How can we receive that?