

Pentecost 9  
22/7/2018

Mark the Evangelist

1 John 4:1-6

Psalm 139

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Knowing and Believing

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In a sentence:

*Our knowledge of God must yield to God's knowledge of us*

Just between us I confess that, most of the time, I am not a very good believer. By 'most of the time', I mean those times which are not between 10.05 and 11.10 on a typical Sunday morning, (assuming that the Sunday service runs for an hour and finishes about 11.00).

For that 65 minutes or so I find that what I do and say and think is a matter of believing. It is 'easy' to believe here, because in this space we hear what it *is* to believe. For the rest of the week I am less a believer in God than an aspiring *knower* of God. I suspect that I am not alone in this, and so with John's help we'll consider today the difference between these two ways of being before God – knowing and believing.

As we have worked through the text of 1 John we have noticed that 'knowing' is something which pops up quite a bit. This is because of the approach to God which John's opponents have taken, which is 'gnostic' in its tendencies. 'Gnostic' is a technical word in religious studies, and has a connection to our English word 'knowledge:' they both spring from the same Greek root (*gnosis*), to do with *knowing*. The Gnostics were those who 'knew.' If we aspire to *know* something about God, then John has something to say to us.

As a matter of course, we need to know things: where to find water, who our parents are or the difference between a red light and green one on a street corner. Such knowledge locates the world around us and renders the world *safer*. The one who does not 'know' lives in peril, which is why we spend so much time educating our children. Not to know what kind of world it is in which we live makes us unsafe, unable to fend for ourselves, unable to *defend* ourselves ('fend' being a contraction of 'defend'). This is to say just what conventional wisdom has long known: knowledge is power.

Yet, in relation to God – at least, to the God of Jewish and Christian confession – this is catastrophic. We can, of course, know things 'about' God. But what we might know about God gives us no *handle* on God, no leverage, no influence. It is not like mundane knowledge which maps the world with its treasures and pitfalls. Knowledge about God does not work in this way because not because our knowing of God is deficient but because – to put it bluntly – there are no defences against God, not even knowledge.

Perhaps it is even surprising that we might want to defend ourselves against God. After all, as John goes on to declare in the verses which follow what we've heard this morning, God is 'love' – something which is heard much about the churches.

But the thing about this declaration is that it only makes sense actually *to declare* it if there was good reason to *doubt* it in the first place. 'God is love' is a powerful and reorienting statement for me if, in fact, I previously had good reason to think that God is

*not* love, that God is a threat and so I would do well to smart-up in order to reduce the risk God presents. If God is a threat, knowledge of God's weak spots would be more than valuable.

It is this kind of 'smarting-up' against which John writes: there is nothing you can know which will protect you from God. Faith is not about our knowledge of God but about God's knowledge of us. My faith in God, properly, has to do with God's knowledge of me – knowing that God knows me.

And so Christian 'spirituality' – the interest in God's own Spirit – looks not like our knowledge of God or our spiritual techniques but is a confession that God knows us. In John's own community, this was the difference between two live choices. One option was knowledge of the 'mysteries' of God. The mysteries were the knowledge of where God is, how God can be accessed – basically, God in a box, bound up in theological theory. The other option was believing that God had searched and known us in the person of Jesus – that the being of God entered into the very human life of Jesus.

God-in-a-box is attractive because, in the end, things in a box remain there until we open it – or perhaps the image of a genie in a bottle is more apt! It is good to know where God is, because then we can avoid God (tell ourselves that God doesn't matter in this question, this decision, this action); or we can access God easily when a God seems to be needed.

By contrast, John says: in *this* is knowledge – not that we knew God, but that God has searched and known us (cf. Psalm 139 – heard also today). This has happened in the meeting of God with us in the person of Jesus; this is the test John applies for 'orthodoxy' in today's reading. This orthodoxy – what we now call the Incarnation – is not mere doctrinal correctness. It is a word to our desire to bottle God up in a remote heaven, over against God's free entry into the world on God's own terms. An incarnation even to the point of a death on a cross is a free act of God which undermines all human aspiration to know or control God. Such an incarnation is a wisdom which looks foolish, a strength which looks like weakness.

In the end, the difference between being a knower of God and a believer of God is whether or not we hold that God is *free*. To imagine that we know something is to imagine that we have secured it, put it in its place, can get to it or around it as we need to. This is as much the case with God as it is with anything else we know about how the world works.

Yet in *this* place we pray each week: *your* kingdom come, *your* will be done, *earth* become heaven: provide, forgive, deliver. These are all impossible things for a God who is not free, who is bound by the rules we 'know' a God should follow. But we pray this because we believe that God *is* free – a freedom *over against* us in our desire to control but, *because of the nature of God*, a freedom which is also *for* us.

For God's knowledge of us is not a confining, objectifying knowledge but a liberating knowledge, a *loving* knowledge. We are not objects which God could love or not. We are persons created for relationship with God. That this is so we see in the coming together of humankind and God in Jesus.

This is harder to hold to than might seem, because it is not 'knowledge' of the ordinary kind.

This is a knowing-in-relation. Our worship is just such a knowing, or should point to such a knowing. Here we do not discard all that we know, but let it sit in its right place – at the service of the God who will take it and make a means of revealing even more about himself.

To believe is to know that God is greater than what we know, ‘greater than our hearts’ (3.20). And because this is the case, we will be yet greater, for God knows us in order to bring us back to him.

For this grace in Christ Jesus, all thanks be to God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now and always. Amen.

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