

Pentecost 12 Year A - Exodus 1:8-2:10; Psalm 124; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

One of the great joys of human existence is making new friends. According to personality tests I've done over the years, I'm moderately introverted. I can see the truth of this in that I tend to have a small number of close friends rather than a large group of acquaintances who I know less well.

I find interacting with large groups of people tiring and I'll often remark after a social event that I'm feeling "peopled out." To some people I know, however, more people means more fun. I'm naturally drawn to people like myself who enjoy a one-on-one chat more than a room full of new people.

For me, getting to know someone is an intimate undertaking. It requires a degree of vulnerability to move beyond superficialities to share the joys and sorrows of life with someone else. Unless we're prepared to offer someone a peak behind the shell or mask that we present to the world, it's very hard for someone to truly get to know us.

Knowing about someone is much easier. Even without meeting someone we can know all kinds of things about them. We might look them up on Facebook, we might know where they live we might even have some friends in common. However, unless we actually meet someone and they are prepared to share something of themselves with us, we are never going to move beyond knowing about them to knowing them.

In the case of people from history, we are stuck with knowing about them. Even the best biography is never going to get us close to the sort of knowledge that comes from spending time with someone. When it comes to Jesus, however, there is one important difference between him and other people who lived 2000 years ago.

The Christian Church teaches that Jesus is isn't dead. We proclaim that Jesus is alive and well, seated at the right hand of God the Father. What we might mean by "the right hand of God the Father" is a question for another sermon.

So, if Jesus is alive, can we know him? Or are we stuck just knowing about him? I don't think there's anything wrong with studying Jesus as a historical figure, I'm taking a class this semester learning about the Judaism of Jesus's era so I have a better understanding of him and the early church.

If we are to move beyond just knowing about Jesus, how might this happen? It perhaps also worth asking if this is something we want. In this morning's Gospel reading, Simon Peter knows Jesus' true identity. Jesus' response tells us two things that I think are worth noting. The first is that this knowledge is a blessing and the second is that this knowledge can only come from God.

The word Matthew uses to describe the imparting of this knowledge is “reveal.” God has *revealed* the truth to Peter. The Greek word is *apokalupto* which can have an ordinary meaning of removing a physical cover, but it’s also used commonly in the Greek versions of the Old Testament to describe revelation to the prophets. When the Word of God comes to Samuel, the Greek word is the same, *apokalupto*.

How then, might we expect God to reveal Jesus to us? One of the best explanations of this that I’ve found is within the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. One of his fundamental convictions is that God is personal. Unless God reveals Godself to us, just like a human person, we aren’t going to know God. An objective knowledge of God will be, at best, knowledge about God. The testimony of Christians throughout the ages is that God reveals God’s true self through Jesus Christ.

Like us, Bonhoeffer knows, that God is everywhere. However, there are some particular places where God wills to reveal Jesus to us just as to Simon Peter. Again, these aren’t the only places or the only methods but we might say that these places are the normative places the Christian Church looks to find Jesus.

It should be fairly obvious that if we want to hear the Living Word of God, Christ Jesus, speak today, one place where we might look is the written Word, the Bible. Regardless of how we understand the nature of scripture’s inspiration, the Church knows that the Bible has a unique place in our life together.

What might be less obvious is that, especially within the Reformed tradition, which is part of our Anglican inheritance, preaching is considered and form of the Word of God: the proclaimed Word. Now, as an occasional preacher with no illusions of greatness, I don’t find this idea particularly easy to accept. However, I’m prepared to take the Church’s word on this point given the minds much greater than mine who believe it.

What helps a little is that my conception of the presence of God’s word in a sermon is similar to how I expect to find God’s word in the Bible. While I would never deny that the writing of the Bible is in some way inspired, I rely on the Holy Spirit to inspire my reading more than my intellect to discern Jesus in what was written. I can stand up here this morning because I have confidence that if God has a message for you, the Holy Spirit can reveal that to you, just as to Simon Peter, regardless, and quite likely, in spite, the words of flesh and blood.

Like us, Bonhoeffer knows that Jesus meets us in the sacrament of the Eucharist. We proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ in the breaking of bread and the drinking of wine. The Church remains divided over how we should understand Christ’s presence in the Eucharist but when the presiding priest says “the Lord is here” I for one am happy to accept that simple truth.

One reason why I know this to be true is because the Church has gathered. The Christian Community is another way that Bonhoeffer knows that Christ is present to us. Paul talking about Christians comprising the body of Christ is not, I think, mere metaphor.

Our practice over centuries on gathering on the Lord's day, to hear scripture and celebrate the Eucharist reflects the Church's sure and certain hope of meeting the risen Lord in Word, sacrament and community.

While it might appear obvious, I'm a little curious about why Jesus thinks this is a blessing. In the case of Simon Peter, we know it was a mixed blessing. Yes, he saw the messiah, he witnessed the transfiguration and the resurrection. But what he saw, lead him to his death. So changed was Peter that he was unable to keep silent when the authorities would have preferred that he did.

One of the remarkable things about Bonhoeffer's work is the very straight line that links his understanding of Jesus with his idea of what Christian life should be like. In technical terms, his ethics are driven by his Christology. That line passes through Bonhoeffer's account of reality. Once we know Jesus, we know the true nature of existence. When we see the world through Jesus' eyes we see correctly.

This too is a mixed blessing. The more clearly we know Jesus, the harder it is to accept ease and comfort when others are oppressed. Like Peter, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was committed to the truth of the Gospel and chose to minister in the outlawed Confessing Church rather than conform to the demands of the alternate truth of Nazism. Getting to know Jesus isn't safe, it has a worrying track record of getting people killed.

So, if my reading of Bonhoeffer is right, that we should be looking to get to know Jesus in certain places, what, if anything should we do about it? Firstly, for people like me to love to study, I should be alert to when my study takes me too far from the Bible, the sacraments and the Christian community. When I find myself in esoteric rabbit holes it's even more important that I look for Christ where he wills to be found.

The main way that I do this is showing up for Church. I'm lucky that there's a community that prays morning prayer together at my work. Regardless of what else happens in my day, I hear from the Bible and meet together with fellow Christians. I'm blessed to be part of *this* community with you too. Even when I don't feel like coming outside on a Christchurch winter morning, I know that the community gathers here around Word and sacrament. Jesus said "do this in remembrance of me" and I zip up my jacket and obey.

I don't think Bonhoeffer is suggesting that other spiritual disciplines are of no value, and that's not what I'm trying to say either. Study, meditation and generosity for example are all very valuable practices. What I think we need to hear is that Word, sacrament, and community are at the centre of Christian practice.

And for all of us, when God seems a bit distant, when Jesus doesn't feel very alive and present to us, I think Bonhoeffer would suggest that we look first to the community, the sacraments and the Bible if we want to feel closer to God. It's unfortunate that so often the Church has chosen to cast this in a negative light, threatening damnation to those "outside" the Church.

I'm glad that in this day and age it's much harder to scare people into coming to church. The challenge for us is that it becomes even more important that our life together is imbued with the life of Christ. It's my prayer that as God reveals Jesus to us, we would be more and more conformed to Christ, both collectively and as individuals, so that we too can be the way God reveals Jesus to the world around us.