

May 24th 2020 Sermon for 7th Sunday after Easter –

Rev Joshua Brocklesby, Curate of St Mary's Church Watford

Bible Reading Acts 1:6-14

Gospel Reading John 17:1-11

“After Jesus said this, he looked towards heaven and prayed: “Father the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began. I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. I remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name – the name you gave me – so that they may be one as we are one.”

May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In our passage from John, we have Jesus talking about his leaving the world, about his going back to the Father. And with Ascension Day having been on Thursday, the day when in the church calendar we celebrate Jesus ascending to heaven, then this reading fits very well. But I want us to focus today on a line which Jesus says towards the beginning of the passage. “Now this is eternal life: that they know you.” It is a remarkable sentence because Jesus here is telling us what eternal life is in the simplest of terms. If you have read the Gospel of John before, you will have heard Jesus speak about eternal life a lot and most people when they hear it think of it as life which goes on forever. But it is more than that. Eternal life in all that Jesus says about it, is a new way of living and being which can start now. Not something we enter into after death but something that you and I can start now.

And so Jesus here is telling us what eternal life is, and that is huge. And it also sounds pretty simple, although there is a beautiful depth to it, which we can discuss. So to the question ‘what is eternal life?’ we can answer ‘it is knowing God.’

But the follow up question to this is ‘how can we know God?’ Depending where we are on our spiritual journey we may not even believe God exists, let alone think God is something or someone we can know in any way. And if knowing is linked to knowledge and knowledge is only gained from things we can prove or show, then how can we know God? Perhaps eternal life is really just for when we die. When whatever limitations we have as humans perhaps no longer exist.

I’m aware this is deep stuff. But the joy of the Christian message is that there is a simple starting place to all this. And the question we might ask is also normally one the disciples

have already done so. And that is exactly the case here. If you've tuned in to one of our services before you may have heard me mention that our readings from John at the moment come from what we often call The Farewell Discourse. The part in St John's Gospel where Jesus is talking to his disciples before he goes to die on the cross. At the beginning of this conversation we hear this: Jesus says "if you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on you do know him and have seen him. Philip said 'Lord show us the Father and that will be enough.' Jesus answered 'Don't you know me Philip, even after such a long time with you. Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say show us the Father'"

Jesus claims that in knowing him we know God and the disciples respond and ask like most humans would "well, show us God then." And Jesus says that anyone who has seen him, has seen the Father, has seen God. So we learn that if we look to Jesus and if we know Jesus then we also know the Father. What we know and see of Jesus, we see and know of God.

Now there is a difference between the disciples and ourselves, where they saw Jesus in flesh and blood, we see Jesus through their words and what is written. But we can learn a lot from this and so I want us to use the remainder of this sermon to look at three things we know of Jesus. For those of you who tune into our Wednesday service I will explore some of these things in a little more detail. But for now we will look at three things we know of Jesus and therefore three things we know of God as we journey into this new way of living called eternal life.

The first is humility. In Jesus we see humility. Humility is something Jesus speaks highly of continually. But its also something which he embodies completely. Whether it is his humble birth and upbringing, or his humble lifestyle and actions. Or the great act of humility he shows on the cross. In Jesus we know what it is to be humble. Even in the story of his triumphant entry into Jerusalem we find Jesus riding on a donkey rather than a majestic steed. Being humble therefore appears to be a key aspect of Jesus' character and one which we know was not a one-off but deeply embedded in who he was. We can therefore say with great confidence that Jesus was humble. In fact humility is so much a part of Jesus that it is something which appears linked to God's glory and exalting. It is a key element of God's kingdom and values. In our passage from John, Jesus speaks about it now being the time for him to be glorified by God. And yet now is the time when Jesus is to die a humiliating death on a cross. God's glory seems to be linked to acts of humility. Indeed it is perhaps not surprising therefore that Jesus teaches us in Luke chapter 14 that everyone who exalts themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted. Acts of humility bring glory to God. So we know Jesus was humble and therefore we know that we have a humble God. A God so humble that this everlasting and eternal God does not allow anything to come between a desire for us such very simple and fleeting humans to know that we are loved. A God who will stop at nothing in showing us that.

Something else we know of Jesus is that he had a servant heart. In Mark 10 he says "for even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve." Jesus came to help others not to have others serve him. We see this best in the story of the foot-washing in John's Gospel. A moment when Jesus takes on the role of a slave and kneels down and washes the disciples feet. So shocking a moment that for Peter, one of his disciples, he initially refuses

because he does not see how Jesus could do such a lowly act without there being a detriment to his reputation, But that is the key part to all of this; that Jesus despite having the exalted position of being one with the Father and being with the Father from the beginning of it all, does not see this as meaning we must all worship and bow down to him, instead he kneels down before us and offers to wash our feet. It is truly incredible. We know from words and deeds that Jesus was servant hearted and therefore we know God is servant hearted. We are not called to do anything which our God would not do themselves. Jesus calls us to serve others because he came and served us. We have a God who is prepared to show us how deeply we are loved. That day the creator of all we see around us, that being of power and majesty beyond our comprehension, that that God is prepared to kneel down and wash our feet as an act of love and to show and ask us to do likewise for each other. We often sing songs about how amazing our God is but hopefully this is a reminder of just how amazing our God is and just how beautiful a God we have, how beautiful a love we have from God. And so we know all this because we know and see it in Jesus.

And finally, although there is much we could look at, we will finish by looking at the fact that we have a God of compassion and love. After looking at the previous characteristics that is perhaps obvious now. But in Jesus we see someone continually moved by their love and compassion of others. Here are some examples:

Luke 7 "When the Lord saw her, he felt compassion for her."

Matthew 9 "Seeing the people he felt compassion for them."

Mathew 20 "moved with compassion".

Mark 6 "When Jesus went ashore he saw a large crowd and he felt compassion for them."

And one of my favourites is in the story of the rich young man. That encounter where the man was not prepared to humble himself and follow Jesus and it says "Jesus looked at him and loved him." How beautiful is that? That this man who is about to reject Jesus, Jesus still looks at him and loves him.

And perhaps most moving of all is the story of Jesus and Lazarus where we learn in John that when Jesus arrived he wept so that those who were there exclaimed "see how he loved him". We see and know in Jesus love and compassion. And therefore we know we have a God of love and compassion. A God who cries with us in our mourning and our grieving. A God who looks at us and loves us regardless of whether we accept or reject him. A God who sees us and has compassion.

If eternal life is knowing God then there is much we can know about God from learning and knowing Jesus. And this knowledge is not limited to what we read in the Bible but it is a knowledge which can be lived and experienced. Jesus says eternal life is knowing God. It is an ongoing thing, it is in our relationship and journey. And within this relationship as we enter the season when we look towards Pentecost, we have the reminder of the gift of the Holy Spirit. The gift of the revealer, the spirit of truth within whom we learn and experience the amazing depth and endless love of God.

On Ascension Day we celebrate that Jesus is alive and is ascended to be with the Father forever. Today let us remember that Jesus invites us into this new way of living now. Of

living a life where we know God and choose to live within that knowledge. A way of life which never ends. Paul words it like this “now we see only a reflection as in a mirror, then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall know fully.” That is an amazing thought, that one day we will know God face to face, we will know God fully. But for now we have so much to begin with in this new way of life knowing God, because we have Jesus in whom and through whom we can start and continue the journey of knowing God. And how that journey leads us into a new way of being, a new way of living, one which Jesus claims is eternal life and one which Jesus calls abundant life. Amen.