

EVENSONG Sunday 5th October Trinity 20

Do we Really know Christ?

Our New Testament reading this evening comes from a set of letters which all appear under the authorship of John. These Letters of John open a window on one period in the life of the community of John, those Christian groups from which sprang the earlier Gospel of John. Indeed, interpretation of the letters of John depends a lot on reconstructing their historical context from the few internal clues they supply.

My commentaries tell me - and I wrote this sermon when I was away, and my laptop could only manage 5! - that the first thing to be established is the relationship between these 3 Johannine Letters and the Gospel of John. You may have found my choice of words "that the Gospel of John *sprang from* a community. There is a weight of scholarship which indicates that the Gospel, although initially penned under one hand, was subject to review and editing possibly by another person. The great prologue to John's Gospel - in the beginning was the word - may have been a part of this editorial process. While some interpreters argue that one or all of the Letters precede the composition of the Gospel of John, most Johannine scholars now date the Letters after the Gospel or late in the extended period of its composition. A date about A.D. 100 is therefore preferred for the Letters. The three Letters are also usually attributed to one author, who may or may not have been the final editor of the Gospel.

John often calls his readers 'children' or little children or dear children and He writes *so that you will not sin*. Earlier John had told them that he and those with him proclaimed the message so that his readers may enjoy fellowship with them (1:3), and that he has written so that his joy may be complete (1:4). This last statement fits in with the others for sin disrupts fellowship and destroys joy.

The principal factor in the setting of the Letters is that the community of John was split; some of its members had left it. And it is sin, says John, that disrupts

fellowship. It is clear that the letter we call I John was written to the remaining members of the community to encourage them to remain faithful and to warn them against the errors of the opponents who had left the community. You see, even 70 years or so after the death of Jesus, human nature had thrust its way into the dynamics of the little Christian communities - my understanding of what Jesus really meant is better than yours - I want to be the principal elder - I have a direct revelation from God and know the special secret of the faith, and if you come with me I shall let you know, but not the others. It's all very much like a school playground. And sadly nothing much has changed - except Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, forever.

We'll call the writer of the letter John, and I believe (and many scholars agree) that the writer is the same one who wrote the Gospel. Whether this is the same John, son of Zebedee we shall never know for sure, but early church tradition (from Irenaeus on) says that it is.

So John calls his readers to maintain their close fellowship, and he calls them, and he calls us "know" Jesus. Paul in Phil 3 uttered the same call: "I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead." Knowing Jesus opens the door to a present experience of resurrection power.

But a question many ask: how can we tell if we really "know" Him?

Part of our problem is that we can be confused by different meanings of the word "know." For instance:

- "know *that*" means *I have information.*
- "know all about trout" may be a claim that I can catch them.
- "know Henry" may express friendship, acquaintance, or simply ability to identify a person in a crowd.
- "know Plato" probably is a claim to understand his philosophy.
- "know what you mean," can even be an expression of sympathy.

What then does it mean to "know" Jesus? The Greek word used here, *ginosko*,

means basically “grasping the full reality and nature of an object under consideration. It is thus distinguished from mere opinion, which may grasp the object half-correctly, inadequately, or even falsely.”

How important then, John’s promise, ‘we know that we ...know Him’(1 John 2:3).

John wrote to people who knew *about* Jesus, but who were not sure that they knew *Him*. We too know *about* Jesus, but our grasp of truth may be incomplete, or we may have been misled by a wrong teaching or doctrine. How can we be sure that in spite of gaps in our understanding, we have a close personal relationship with the Lord? If you are like me, this is one of the doubts of faith that often pop up like one of those annoying messages that has just popped onto the screen.

John launched into an explanation of how we can be sure, not theoretically but experientially, that we know Jesus. He wants us to be free from nagging doubts and fears.

We know Jesus if respond to His commands (1 John 2:3–). Jesus said, “My sheep listen to My voice; I know them, and they follow Me”(John 10:27). Those who belong to Jesus are responsive to His voice.

It’s important not to misunderstand here. John does not suggest that relationship with God is *established* by obedience; rather, that relationship is *demonstrated* by obedience.

Sometimes people claim to know God but do not seem to be moved by Jesus, his living Word and His way of life. Such a person may possess accurate information about God and may be able to debate finer points of theology. Such a person may have memorized much of the Bible and regularly be in church. But unresponsiveness to God’s voice shows that they do not fully and deeply experience and know God. Relationship is demonstrated by walking “As Jesus did”(1 John 2:6).

John goes on to describe the central command (1 John 2:7–1). Of course, this business of responsiveness to the Word of God can be distorted into a legalism in which

the list of do's and don'ts grows longer. That turns us into the Pharisees - all law and no love. We try to measure our relationship with God as we do the temperature - by degrees.

To make sure his little community would avoid this error, John quickly established a central command from which all else flows. That command has been known and revealed through both old and New Testaments, but has been given fresh meaning in Jesus' coming. Jesus calls us to "love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another"(John 13:34). John said that the one who hates his brother cannot be walking in the light (1 John 2:11).

So, if you or I wonder if we're really responsive to Jesus' voice, we don't have to measure ourselves against a list of things we do or don't do to please Him. All we have to do is look inside ourselves, and inside our Christian community to see if we are reaching out, to care for our fellow Christians.

John seemed to have more confidence in the people he wrote to than they did themselves. He didn't question their relationship with Jesus. He was sure that they did know Him and that they could live in fellowship with God.

John had reasons for his confidence:

- These little children of his had made an initial commitment to Jesus, and their sins had been forgiven.
- These fathers had lived in relationship with a God who had demonstrated Himself to be stable and trustworthy from the beginning of the universe.
- These young men had been challenged in their faith by the evil one, and God's strength and His Word in them had enabled them to overcome the threat.

These people could take the test John suggested. They could examine themselves and discover that they were responsive to Jesus' voice; they had begun to love.

These inner drawings toward Jesus help us to be sure that we do know Him.

In the last few verses of our reading John helps us look within ourselves to find the evidence of the reality of our relationship with Jesus. And he John warns that in order to love and respond to God, we must stop acting from the motives that reflect the world's value system. And John gives the word "World" a moral and theological meaning - referring to the created universe and to mankind *as fallen*.

This world, John says later (5:19) "is under the control of the evil one."The values

and the attitudes that characterize the world —“cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has”(2:16) do not come from God.

A Christian cannot live with a divided heart, responding one moment out of love for God and at the next turning to the world for pleasure. If we want to demonstrate (to ourselves, as well as to God) that we know Him, we need to make a clear-cut commitment to do the will of God rather than respond to the world's passions.