

Transforming lives through following Christ in love and service *by knowing growing and going***1. Knowing****Caroline Yandell**

Knowing, growing and going; the three strands of delivering our vision – ‘Transforming lives through following Christ in love and service.’

And today we are going to think about ‘knowing’, or more fully, ‘knowing God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit’. Knowing, growing and going of course are not completely discreet. Knowing more of God can’t really be separated from growing in our faith and commitment. Nor can knowing and growing be separated from going into the world with God’s love; knowing and growing both give us an outward looking imperative to share what has been given to us with those beyond the church. And it works the other way round too; as we go, so we will grow both in our faith and knowledge of God. But we need to start somewhere!

There are, of course, different aspects to our knowing and in our vision leaflet we have set out 3 headings: worship, prayer and preaching/teaching/learning and it’s this last that I want to start with.

If we want to have knowledge of God, what God has done, what he is calling us to, how he wants us to live our lives, then we are going to need to get to grips with the Bible. Some of that can and should come from good Biblical teaching and preaching Sunday by Sunday - exposition of God’s Word – explaining the scriptures – and helping us to see the relevance and application of God’s Word to our day to day lives. But that can ever only be the tip of the iceberg – all of us are going to need to work a lot harder than just listening to sermons (some of you might think it’s already pretty hard work listening to some sermons!) We need to follow through on what we hear, perhaps re-read the sermons, look at the Biblical texts throughout the subsequent week and we might talk about the sermons with each other over coffee after the service. And our learning will also come from what we study together in small groups, from Bible studies, the books we read together, perhaps from other specific courses such as the healing course as well as our own private reading and study of the Bible.

We need to know *about* God and the things of God, but more than that, we need to **know** God. And the Word of God is itself transformational. There is no other book like it. When read, heard and received with an open heart it brings about encounter. You see, ‘knowing’ God the Father Son and Holy Spirit is much more than the acquisition of theoretical knowledge, much more than what can be achieved by study and learning. It has to involve encounter. And as well as ‘knowing’, it is also about ‘being known’.

There is a world of difference between knowing about, and having experience. However good our theoretical knowledge it doesn’t come anywhere near to meeting a person we have read or heard about, or to the experience of being in a place that has been described to us.

Before our recent trip to Uganda I had heard a lot about Gulu, I had looked at maps, seen photos heard stories, and even met people who lived there. But good and helpful as that was, it was no substitute for being there myself when I did finally visit - experiencing the place through all of my senses - feeling the ground under my feet and getting the rich dust on my shoes, experiencing the intensity of the heat, the power of the storms with thunder and lightening the like of which I had never seen or heard before, hearing the sounds of the bustling market, the busy town and, at night, the deafening crickets, the smells of the place and the tastes of the food - including the boiled goat! I experienced it for myself and knew it in a different way.

We could say similar things about our knowledge of God – the difference between theory and encounter. I have spent quite a lot of time studying theology, have read many books, written thousands

upon thousands of words, attended and even given numerous lectures, and, for the most part, that has been helpful. But that on its own is not enough. If our knowing involves only our minds, only our rational or intellectual side, then we don't know the half of it. Christianity is not merely assent to a set of beliefs or a matter of having correct understanding of Christian doctrine. It is about a relationship with the living God. Head and heart must come together. Our rational 'knowing' can only take us so far.

Our Epistle speaks of the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. It is beyond our human powers to comprehend. But the Holy Spirit, the personal presence of God dwelling in us, can and does take us beyond what we can know from our rational powers alone. And so Paul prays that the Ephesians will be strengthened in their inner being with power through the Holy Spirit so that might comprehend and know that love and be filled with all the fullness of God.

And it is particularly in our prayer and worship that our relationship with God is deepened and enriched. If we do not spend time in the presence of God we cannot hope to know Him more. And that's why these two strands are so important in our 'knowing'

When we worship God we are most fully responding to who God is, and, I believe, as we are caught up in worship into the heavenly places, we glimpse something of the awe and majesty of God. And as that happens, so we come to know him more. Of course our whole lives should be an act of worship as we give praise and glory to God in all things. But there is also something very important about our corporate worship, what we do as we come together as God's people in this place. We are a pretty diverse bunch of people and I thank God that he hasn't made us all the same! We don't all like modern music, dancing and clapping, just as not everyone appreciates a diet of liturgy and hymns. It's not just that our tastes are different, but that we express ourselves, express our worship of God in different ways. And sometimes we need to express ourselves in different ways at different times. Our worship must be authentic and it must be real - above all else it must be the best that we can possibly offer to God, regardless of its style. Which is why, to realise our vision, we need to commit ourselves to a range of styles and to be generous to each other in that, seeking always to glorify God in the worship we offer.

In our prayer, too, we will find that there are different ways of praying that will come more naturally to some than to others. The quiet contemplation of the Julian Group is different to the 9.15 morning prayer on Tuesdays to Thursdays, but perhaps more like the silent prayer on Fridays. We need all of it and more besides. Without us being rooted in prayer both as individuals and a church we might just as well whistle in the wind. It is prayer that changes things. And most of all, it is prayer that changes us, transforming us into the people God wants us to be, deepening our relationship with the Father in the power of the Spirit through the Son. It is here, in prayer, that we most fully yield to God. As we pray, and that means listening and being still as well as bringing our needs and requests to God, it is here, open to God and the work of his Spirit in us, that we can surrender ourselves and cooperate with the transformation that God longs for us to know.

Our Gospel speaks of the End Times and the Second Coming of Christ when Jesus will appear in all his glory - when we will see him face to face. And in this season of Advent which begins today we prepare to celebrate that God made himself known to us by taking human flesh, being born as a human baby in Bethlehem 2000 years ago. But in Advent we are also reminded of, and called to wait expectantly for, that time when he will come again and we will stand in his presence. A time is coming when we will know God in a way we have never known him before.

But our knowing has already begun and even now God is calling us to know him and to share in his life. And together that's the call that we must respond to as we seek to realise the vision that God has given to St Peter's.