

Words from a favourite chant: God is passionate life, strong and vibrant in us, as we seek fullness of life for all creatures. Amen.

This past Wednesday I was in chapel for eucharist, and as we read the lections for this Sunday, my mind went to a sermon I preached on these texts 37 years ago. It was a favourite of my father's. I sent him a photocopy of my handwritten text and he had his secretary type it up and mail it back to me. On Friday I learned that Bishop Barbara could not be here this morning. So here is a somewhat edited version of that sermon...

Have you ever been asked, "Do you know Jesus Christ as your Saviour?" I remember finding it a difficult question to respond to.

What does it mean to know the Lord? The persons we know best are those we live with, those we experience day by day, in practical, immediate relationships. This intimate kind of knowledge is what the Bible means when it speaks of knowing God. For the biblical writers, knowing God is not a matter of intellect, or of abstract ideas. To know God means to trust God's nature, to understand what God's will or purpose is, and to choose to align our actions with that. In contrast, to not know the Lord, is expressed in some translations as not caring, not acknowledging, even opposing the Lord. For example, in the story of the Exodus, when Moses is asking Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go so that they may offer sacrifices to the Lord in the wilderness, Pharaoh's response is: "I know nothing of the Lord... Why should I let his people go?"

Knowing the Lord is a theme that emerges in each of this morning's readings, but I want to focus on the story of Samuel. Just before the part we heard read, there is this description of Eli's two sons who are also priests:

“Now Eli’s sons were scoundrels and did not know the Lord. The young men’s sin was very great in the Lord’s sight for they brought the Lord’s sacrifice into general contempt.” And so the Lord makes a decision to bring to an end this particular family succession of priests, and says: “I will appoint for myself a priest who will be faithful, who will do what I have in my mind and in my heart.” In other words, a priest who will know me. And this is where the boy Samuel enters the picture.

The story of Samuel’s call is one of the stories I remember from my youth. (Maybe some of you do too.) It’s easy to imagine this young man, trying to get to sleep, in the sanctuary of all places, who keeps hearing someone call him. Thinking that it must be the old priest Eli, Samuel keeps getting up and running to him, only to be told: “No, I didn’t call you, go back to bed.”

There are some notable details in the story that can help us understand what it means to know the Lord. There is a paradox that caught my attention. Here we have a boy who was brought to the temple as a very young child to be raised in the service of the Lord, by Eli the priest. The boy grew up in the presence of the Lord. In fact, it says he slept each night near the ark of God. The Ark was at the centre of Israelite faith and life; it was considered the place or focus of God’s presence and power. And the boy Samuel slept near it every night. And yet, even with all these years of exposure, the text says that Samuel had not yet come to know the Lord. Even with his familiarity with things religious, even with his physical closeness to the focus of God’s presence and power, Samuel did not know the Lord.

That’s the first thing to note.

The second point to note is that it is the Lord who comes to Samuel and calls him and not vice versa. This is a pattern throughout Scripture, and we see it in Jesus' calling of his disciples. The Bible affirms that **God chooses us and calls us, even while we are still unaware of God's presence.**

The third point is that Samuel runs away from the One who calls him. He flees. Not consciously perhaps, but he is afraid to acknowledge who it is who is calling him, and so he seeks to escape in the familiar roles and persons and routines of his life. He runs away from God to Eli.

Running away, or hiding, is another recurring theme in the Bible – it's one of the basic characteristics of spiritual life.

Eli, wise and good priest that he is, eventually twigs to the fact that it is God who is calling Samuel, and he gives Samuel some spiritual direction. This is the fourth point: that there are wise and good persons in our life who listen deeply and may help us recognize the meaning of what is happening.

When I first read and re-read this story, the question I found myself asking was this: at what point did Samuel come to know the Lord? One might think it was when he went back to his bed, ready to hear what the Lord had to say: "Speak Lord, your servant is listening." And yet, the story is not complete with Samuel's hearing of the Word. He is called to speak the word, to deliver it, to bring it to completion. It is when he shares with Eli the difficult word God has given him to speak about Eli and his sons: that's when Samuel knows the Lord.

It's like the story of Genesis where the word 'know' has a concrete sexual meaning. We are told that Adam knew his wife Eve and she conceived and gave birth to a son. Similarly, there is a life-giving result from knowing the Lord. This is the fifth and most important point.

To summarize then, there are five points about knowing the Lord which emerge from Samuel's story:

1. Familiarity with religious practices, things or people, does not constitute knowing the Lord.
2. It is the Lord who seeks us out, and not the other way around.
3. Our most typical response is to avoid knowing
4. A spiritual director is a wonderful resource
5. We know the Lord, when we do God's will

Paul, writing to the Corinthians, emphasized that knowing God was not to be equated with euphoric experiences of any sort, be they physical or spiritual, but equated with serving God. "Anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him."

And in John's account of Nathanael's initial response to hearing about Jesus, we see a good example of how instinctive it is to flee or avoid God's call through skepticism and cynicism: "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" "Can anything good come from the church?" Philip's response "Come and see" – is what Jesus said to the first disciples. Jesus found Philip and said to him, "follow me", and right away, we see Philip go and find Nathanel, just as Jesus had found him. We can see in Philip a demonstration of what it means to follow Jesus, to know Jesus: to be engaged in what Jesus himself is doing.

I want to end where I began, with that edgy question: "Do you know Jesus Christ as your Saviour?" And I want to look at another story – a true story of what happened 37 years ago yesterday, when a plane went down in the Potomac River in Washington DC after striking a bridge in a snowstorm just after takeoff. Helicopter rescue workers told the story of one of the

passengers who was hurled into the icy river, who passed up repeated opportunities to be saved, choosing instead to help fellow victims. This is how the helicopter pilot described it (and I quote from the newspaper article): “He could have gone on the first trip – we threw the ring to him first, but he passed it on to somebody else – a man who was bleeding badly from a head injury. We went back 5 times, and each time he kept passing the ring to someone else, including three ladies who were hanging on to the tail section. We flew back to get him, but he was gone. ... We really want to know who he was. That gentleman put everyone else ahead of himself. He is the real hero of this whole thing. There’s no doubt about it. You have to ask yourself the question: If you were in his situation, a hundred yards from shore and knowing that every minute you were closer to freezing to death, could you do it? I really don’t think I could.” (end of quote)

The man who gave up his turn to be saved, in order to save others, truly knew Christ the Saviour, who saved others but did not save himself.

“Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s neighbours”.

The way of the Lord is a hard way, a sacrificial way of self-giving. To do what is in God’s heart and mind is a gift of grace.

And I think there is another way that we know Jesus Christ as Saviour. It’s when we recognize that we most likely would not have given up our turn to be rescued; when we realize that we are unable most, if not all, of the time to do what is in God’s mind and in God’s heart. And it’s when we accept the fact that Jesus gave his life for us, so that we might be raised up from the waters, to live a new life. It’s when we know - that Jesus died, to save us.

Thank you, Jesus, for giving your life that we might live. Amen