

## Circuit service 20<sup>th</sup> Sept 2020

Hello, I wish I could lead worship with you in person. But we have to accept things as they are. We can still be assured that God is with each of us and watches over us.

The theme of the service is how much God knows us. God's knowledge of us far exceeds our knowledge of God. As Paul puts it, we see God as through an imperfect mirror – 'through a glass darkly' in the King James translation. Paul continues: 'Now I know in part, then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.'

God's knowledge of us penetrates to our inmost being. And it is from our inmost being that we worship God and hear God's word to us.

So let us begin our worship with some words from Psalm 103:

*Praise the Lord my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name.*

I've chosen the hymns from Hymns and Psalms with alternatives from Singing the Faith where needed. Our first hymn is a prayer to Jesus to be with us as we worship.

**[HYMN: HP530, Jesus stand among us in thy risen power](#)**

**Or alternatively, omitting the third verse, StF30, Jesus stand among us**

1  
Jesus, stand among us  
at the meeting of our lives,  
be our sweet agreement  
at the meeting of our eyes.  
O Jesus, we love you, so we gather here,  
join our hearts in unity and take away our  
fear.

2  
So to you we're gathering  
out of each and ev'ry land,  
Christ the love between us  
at the joining of our hands.  
O Jesus, we love you, so we gather here,  
join our hearts in unity and take away our  
fear.

Graham Kendrick  
( b. 1950)

### **A PRAYER**

Let us pray.

Lord God, heavenly Father, we thank you that you are with us now. Make your presence clear to us. Let us hear your voice speaking to our inmost being. Send your Spirit to move within us and amongst us – even though we are separated geographically and excluded from the prayed-in buildings in which we usually gather. Enliven our worship. Direct our prayers. Send us into the world full of a desire to serve you. Lord we have so much to thank you for. You watch over each of us as you draw us closer to your kingdom.

Lord, we bow before you as we are - open to your complete knowledge of us. We recall before you this past week – the joys and the sadnesses - the times when we have known you walking with us, and the times when we have been distant from you – the times when

our actions and thoughts have been expressions of your love, and the times when we have fallen short of your royal way.

Lord, forgive us for the wrong we have done. Restore us to health, and strengthen us to tread your path of righteousness.

Lord, you assure us that we can in confidence lay our weakness before. You know us completely, and instead of walking away from us, you draw ever closer. In Jesus you went to the cross to mend the brokenness of humankind. You gave yourself without reserve. Lord we thank you. This is far more than we can ever deserve. It is your loving gift of yourself to us.

In the name of Jesus, and moved by his Spirit, we make these prayers. Amen.

#### THE PSALM

In prayer we have laid ourselves open to God and asked God to pursue his work in us. This intimate engagement with God has been central to the life of God's people throughout the age, right back to psalmists and before.

Psalm 139 speaks of God's knowledge of us, how God searches us and knows us – and how wonderful this is. We now read this psalm as written out in the hymn book. It is number 883 in Hymns and Psalms, or number 835 in Singing the Faith.

I suggest we read it out loud.

PRAYING PSALM 139 (as it appears in the NIV translation)

Lord, we thank you for the wonderful words of this psalm.

We savour the words and meditate upon them:

*You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.*

*If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.*

*Such knowledge is too wonderful for me.*

*Search me God, and know my heart.*

#### WE NOW SAY TOGETHER OUR LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,  
thy kingdom come, thy will be done on Earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread,

and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen

#### HYMN AS WE PREPARE TO HEAR GOD'S WORD

This is a hymn I have come across recently. I love the words, and the set tune (Wetherby) fits it beautifully. It's a shame we cannot actually sing it together.

The hymn is written by John Newton, the ex-slave-trader who famously also wrote the hymn Amazing Grace.

**HP490 Great Shepherd of thy people**  
**An alternative to this hymn, also by John Newton is**  
**[StF322, How sweet the name of Jesus sounds](#)**

1  
How sweet the name of Jesus sounds  
in a believer's ear!  
It soothes our sorrows, heals our wounds,  
and drives away our fear.

2  
It makes the wounded spirit whole,  
and calms the troubled breast;  
'tis manna to the hungry soul,  
and to the weary, rest.

3  
Dear name — the rock on which I build,  
my shield and hiding-place,  
my never-failing treasury, filled  
with boundless stores of grace!

4  
Jesus!  
My Shepherd, Brother, Friend,  
my Prophet, Priest, and King,  
my Lord, my Life, my Way, my End,  
accept the praise I bring.

5  
Weak is the effort of my heart,  
and cold my warmest thought;  
but when I see thee as thou art,  
I'll praise thee as I ought.

6  
Till then I would thy love proclaim  
with every fleeting breath;  
and may the music of thy name  
refresh my soul in death.

John Newton  
(1725–1807)

## READINGS

John 1:40-51, Jesus calls his disciples

Galatians 4:1-11, Living in the freedom of being children of God

## SERMON

Like many who are working from home I spend quite a bit of time on zoom. Since you're watching this I guess you know how zoom works. Everybody in a zoom meeting has a camera on them and we can see each other on the screen. And this includes a picture of oneself. I find myself looking at myself when I ought to be paying attention to others - wondering whether my hair needs cutting – which it does.

It's easy to do this in our relationship with God – paying too much attention to myself instead of paying attention to God. When in fact, the real driver behind our relationship is how much attention God pays to us, and that God watches over us. He knows us and loves

us much more than we know and love him. Our healing and salvation come from God's love for us. It is right that we should know and love God, but what really counts is how much God knows and loves us. What has struck me recently is how much God knows me and pays loving attention to me – and especially the connection between being loved by God and being fully known by God.

In these times of lockdown I spend more time than usual on my Kindle tablet, not only to read books but to access my emails and watch the news. Reading newspapers online can be very frustrating. The screen rapidly fills up with adverts so I can't see the news. When I log on to my Kindle, Amazon sends me adverts tailored to suit me – as they think. My wife and I share an account so I find myself getting adverts for books I do not read and items of clothing not well suited to my body.

Computers in the cloud seems to know everything about me. I have to remind myself that there's not a person up there watching a screen and deciding on adverts for me. It's all done automatically and the computer doesn't care about me personally. Being fully known is not always comfortable – especially when the aim is to extract money from my bank account.

The Bible tells us about being fully known in a different way. The computers in the cloud may know lots about me, but they don't know me personally. God really does know me, and not just as a list of facts and preferences. In Paul's great chapter on love in 1 Corinthians he writes, *"Now I know in part, then I shall know fully, EVEN AS I AM FULLY KNOWN."*

There's a similar thought in our reading from Paul's letter to the Galatians. Paul is urging the Christians in Galatia to live as children of God and not as slaves to the law. He connects being a child of God with knowing God and being known by God. The relevant verses are, *"Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God – OR RATHER ARE KNOWN BY GOD – how is it that you are turning back..."*

What I find interesting is the way Paul revises what he says as he writes. We know that Paul dictated his letters and somebody else wrote it down. So I imagine Paul pacing the room as he dictated his letter to the Galatians. He started dictating *"Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God..."* And then he paused, stopped and after some thought corrected himself: *"or rather are known by God."* Even Paul could fall into the trap of making faith start with himself... and then realising: No, faith starts with God watching out for us, knowing us, and loving us. As Paul puts it in Corinthians, our knowledge of God is seen through a glass darkly.

The theme of being known by God comes through in the gospel reading, but in a different way. It tells the story of Jesus calling his disciples as he begins his ministry. What is amazing is how Jesus knows them without hardly meeting them. As soon as Jesus met Simon he renamed him Peter. Jesus already knew that Peter would be the rock on which to build his church.

In our gospel reading, Jesus calls Nathanael to be a disciple. As Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, *“Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.”* Nathanael was astounded: *“How do you know me?”* It happened repeatedly throughout Jesus’s ministry. Jesus knew who needed his help and their past history - like the Samaritan woman at the well who had had five husbands. Like Zacchaeus the little man up a tree. Jesus knew that of all the people in the crowd, this chief tax collector was ready to turn round his life: *“Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.”*

At other times, we read that Jesus knew people’s thoughts. *“Jesus knew in his spirit what they were thinking in their hearts.”* It must have been very unnerving to meet Jesus and know that he knew your inmost thoughts. Jesus left nowhere to hide. But it was in being known by Jesus that healing was found – and is found now.

Returning to Paul’s letter to the Galatians we learn more of what it means to be known by God. Paul contrasts two ways of living: as a slave of the law and as a child of God. A child of God could address God as *“Abba, Father”*. *“Abba”* is a word of intimacy and trust. It is often said that Abba is what a young child calls its father. But to be a child of God is not to be childish. Jesus himself addressed God as *“Abba Father”* as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. Our relationship to God as Abba Father embraces our mature selves.

If we have children, we will have known them as babies, and if we are fortunate, through childhood and adolescence to adulthood, maybe to see our grandchildren and even possibly our greatgrandchildren – this last pleasure awaits me personally (I hope). The parent-child relationship can have many ups and downs. Childhood has its tantrums. Adolescence can be turbulent. Even the parent-child relationship as adults can be difficult. Sometimes it gets too much for the parent to handle and they have to distance themselves. But for most parents it is emotionally impossible to walk away, whatever their son or daughter does, and at whatever stage of life. Such, and more, is God’s love for us.

The prophet Isaiah puts it well:

*Can a mother forget her baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you. See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.*

The proof and fulfilment of this is the cross. On the cross, God in Jesus learned the extremes of what it is to be human. This is why God can know us fully. On the cross, God loved us to the limit by hanging there and experiencing pain, rejection and loathing.

In all of this – the knowing and the loving – it is God who takes the lead. God knows us much better than we know him. God loves us much more than we can love God. It is important to remember this. We can beat ourselves up because of our failings, our lack of faith, our lack of love for God and for others. But God knows all this and still engraves us on the palms of his hands.

God is not a computer in the cloud accumulating data from cookies and watching to manipulate us. Even less is God up there watching us to tell us off when we do something

wrong. He is instead something very different – someone very different - an “Abba, Father” watching over us because he loves us. And by God’s very nature, God can do no other.

**HYMN: HP691(StF443), Come, let us sing of a wonderful love**

1  
Come, let us sing of a wonderful love,  
tender and true;  
out of the heart of the Father above,  
streaming to me and to you:  
wonderful love  
dwells in the heart of the Father above.

2  
Jesus, the Saviour, this gospel to tell,  
joyfully came;  
came with the helpless and hopeless to  
dwell,  
sharing their sorrow and shame;  
seeking the lost,  
saving, redeeming at measureless cost.

3  
Jesus is seeking the wanderers yet;  
why do they roam?  
Love only waits to forgive and forget;  
home, weary wanderer, home!  
Wonderful love  
dwells in the heart of the Father above.

4  
Come to my heart, O thou wonderful love,  
come and abide,  
lifting my life, till it rises above  
envy and falsehood and pride;  
seeking to be  
lowly and humble, a learner of thee.

Robert Walmsley  
(1831–1905)

**PRAYER**

Let us pray.

Lord God, Abba, Father, we sing of your wonderful love, streaming to each of us from the heart of the Father.

We pray now that your love may be known more fully. We thank you that love will triumph, and even in the direst circumstances, love has its way of making itself known. But we know that for some, love is a distant memory or a distant hope.

In prayer, we hold before you:

Refugees, especially children, separated from their home, their country, even their family.  
Those living in broken countries where there is oppression and terror  
The fight for ethnic and racial equality, especially in the USA, and also in the UK

In this time of the coronavirus, we pray for:

Those who have lost loved ones to the virus  
People suffering from the virus, especially those in hospital or left with its after-effects  
People wrestling with financial insecurity

Lord, we pray for the church:

That it may be true to its mission to spread the gospel  
That it may be a living expression of your love for all people

That we may soon gather again in close fellowship after the lockdown

We pray for situations that have appeared in the newspapers this weekend

Lord, we bring to you our prayers for  
those closest to us  
and also for ourselves.

We thank you that as we make our prayers individually, they become the prayers of your whole church. We thank you that together, we are called to be the Body of Christ and branches of the living vine.

### **OFFERING**

Lord, we are unable to bring our gifts to you for dedication as we would normally during Sunday services. But we can still offer ourselves, who we are, our time and our possessions. Lord, accept our offering. Use us and your church for the coming of your kingdom. In the name of Jesus, we make these prayers. Amen

### **[HYMN: HP267\(StF503\), Love divine, all loves excelling](#)**

1

Love divine, all loves excelling,  
joy of heaven to earth come down,  
fix in us thy humble dwelling,  
all thy faithful mercies crown.  
Jesu, thou art all compassion,  
pure, unbounded love thou art;  
visit us with thy salvation,  
enter every trembling heart.

2

Come, almighty to deliver,  
let us all thy life receive;  
suddenly return, and never,  
never more thy temples leave.  
Thee we would be always blessing,  
serve thee as thy hosts above,  
pray, and praise thee, without ceasing,  
glory in thy perfect love.

3

Finish then thy new creation,  
pure and spotless let us be;  
let us see thy great salvation,  
perfectly restored in thee:  
changed from glory into glory,  
till in heaven we take our place,  
till we cast our crowns before thee,  
lost in wonder, love, and praise!

Charles Wesley  
(1707–1788)

### **BLESSING**

The love of the Father enfold us,  
The wisdom of the Spirit enlighten us,  
The fire of the Spirit enflame us,  
And the blessing of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit –  
be with us all now and in the life to come.