

Knowing God

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 8 June 2025

A Reflection by Allison Gentle

Pentecost C

Acts 2:1-9, 44; John 14:8-17

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Can we know who God is?

In our Gospel reading today, Philip asks that question for all of us. Show us who God is, and that will be enough for us. Jesus sounds disappointed that Philip sees a need to ask the question. He says Look at me, and you will know who God is. It has been God, living in Jesus, who has done the works of healing, the miracles, speaking truth to power, teaching people about the profound realities of their lives, what Bill Loader calls “*God action*.”

I was once talking to an unchurched woman who was telling me about the recent funeral of a family member who had died tragically before her time. She asked me, “*Where was God in that?*” I plunged in intrepidly. “*God was in the way you all gathered to remember her, the way you drew together to comfort each other.*” She nodded a few times and said “*I wish the minister who did the funeral told us that.*”

Sometimes our ideas of God can get in the way of knowing who God is. If we hold an idea of a God who could intervene in everyday tragedies but capriciously chooses which ones, it is hard to see God in everyday blessings, in the real God action we experience.

And yet looking for who God is in the life of a man in whom, as John said, “*the fullness of God was pleased to dwell*,” can get in the way too. It can widen the trap of anthropomorphising God (a six syllable word), seeing God as a collection of the best human characteristics, the ones Jesus had. But God is greater than any idea we can have of God. Perhaps God is both knowable and unknowable, a mystery we can approach but never grasp. Even approaching the mystery of God is a beautiful place to be.

We can also consider what we mean by knowing in this context. We can’t know God like we know some of the answers on a TV quiz show, or like we know how to cook an omelet, with that kind of certainty. But over a life of faith, we can learn to recognise the feeling when we are conscious that God is present. There are moments in prayer and in worship when we feel the presence of God. There are moments of experiencing God in the wonder and beauty of the creation. And there are also moments in active life, when a certain peace falls over a group of people, like those gathered for a funeral, even those gathered for Synod, when consensus is reached after contention, or when we feel ourselves drawn into an action at the heart of God’s will.

I think some of you have heard before the story of when I was driving across America alone in a campervan, or as Americans call them, an RV. Friends were concerned about the dangers I might be courting doing such a thing. And one day I walked into one of their fears, I picked up a hitch hiker, a man in shabby clothes with a shambling gait. As soon as I saw him, I knew I would pick him up, and I was glad my friends couldn't witness the moment. He didn't want to talk, but I saw him looking at the snacks I kept between the front seats and offered him one. He wolfed it down as if he hadn't eaten for days. I offered him another but he declined. Close to where he wanted to be dropped off, he mentioned that he was going to see his sister. I offered to drive him to her house but he said he'd walk, she didn't know he was coming.

I felt I needed also to give him money. I remonstrated with God: I've given him a lift, I've given him food, and now you want me to give him money too? (As Paul said, God loves a cheerful giver.) Yes God did want me to give him money too. Incredulously I watched myself take out a \$20 bill (US dollars) and give it to him.

But at that moment, I felt a huge, powerful rush of love reaching through me to this man. This man who in the eyes of the world was not doing so well, this man who my friends would be horrified to know I had let into my van, this man taking the risk of an unannounced visit to his sister, God loved this man and wanted him to get where he was going with what he needed for the journey.

He wasn't getting the crumbs that fell from my table, he was getting the fatted calf, the full power of God's love. And I, in that moment, knew who God is. In the God action.

Bill Loader believes that when Jesus told Philip that the disciples would do greater things than he had, what he meant was not bigger miracles, but on a broader scale than the short life and limited geography in which Christ has his earthly incarnation. I have shared stories from my life not to virtue signal, but as examples of when we can share in God action, and through this know who God is.

We can see who God is in reading and hearing the works of Jesus, but we can experience it by answering the occasional calls we hear to share in God's work on earth, here and now. The eternal Christ is the guide, the Spirit is the one who reminds us to be still and listen for the call, to answer it when we hear it, to know the truth of who God is.

Our Uniting Church President, Reverend Charissa Suli, heard a call to make a public appeal for peace and justice in Palestine. She made her own call to Uniting Church congregations. In our congregation, Pam Batkin heard the call and made her own call to this congregation. About 20 people heard the call and answered it, many turning up for the largest Pitt Street zoom meeting anyone can remember. There will be more calls to help with this work, and more people will answer.

We know it is God action because we know what Jesus did as God lived in him: he stood for justice and peace. And we know if the call is for us because the Spirit amplifies the call in our ears, the Spirit won't let us forget, the Spirit leads us into the truth. And by participating in God action, we experience who God is.

In the reading from Acts, we hear the astonishment of people that in the power of the Spirit, the disciples are speaking a language that transcends the differences between national languages, that transcends cultures.

This is the language of God, shared by Jesus, shared by the Holy Spirit, that speaks to people, bypassing the powerful mindsets of culture, because it is the language of eternity, of universal values, of love for the outcast, kindness to strangers in need, comfort in grief, healing of distress, justice for the oppressed, freedom for the captives, supernatural peace. Perhaps this is why the language Jesus conversed in has been understood and taken up by people from so many different cultures over the centuries, why it has persisted so far from the time and place of Jesus's short earthly life.

And now it is not only the recorded words of Jesus, controversial as they are, that continue to give his message power, we have the Holy Spirit, who descends like a dove from time to time, bringing us the truth of God's ways, the truth of who God is.

In the power of the Spirit, we feel God's presence, and the truth of why God has broken through into our consciousness in that particular time and place. In the power of the Spirit we know when we are called to participate in God action, and through that experience, we know God.

And it is the accumulation of these moments through the life of faith that enable us to say we know who God is, even as we know we are always in the presence of mystery.

May we all grow in our knowledge of God: in prayer, in worship and in God acts.

Amen.