

Knowing Christ

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[0:00] At the beginning of the service, Alex was going to introduce me, but Matt joined us so his! attention was taken elsewhere. I'm Nick Moxon, Methodist minister in Portishead. Just to give! you some context, it wasn't just the case of we need a vicar and I was walking past and so they dragged me in this morning. There's a reason for me being here. I minister in Portishead and in PIL.

I've been in the circuit for, this is my 10th year and as of the beginning of January, I took over the role as superintendent when Russ moved on. And just to also say that this afternoon, the circuit are having a, I know that you've said a goodbye and a thank you to Russ and to Tam, but we're this afternoon, the circuit are gathering at the Beacon Hub at Portishead Methodist Church this afternoon at 3.30 till 5. Just a drop in and Russ and Tam will be there and we're going to officially thank them for their ministry amongst us. So if you're free this afternoon and you want some coffee and cake and to say thank you to Russ and Tam, then please call in between 3.30 and 5. The earlier you get there, the more chance of cake. Over the last 12 weeks, I've officiated at seven funerals and most of the funerals, in fact all of the funerals, are funerals of people that I've known either through the church that I serve, the churches that I serve or from Portishead, from the community in Portishead.

And when it's come to the eulogy, you know the part when we reflect and we remember about the loved one, the person that we're there to celebrate, at five of those services, the eulogies have been shared by or led by a member of the family. And so I've sat there and I've listened to the family's reflections on their loved one, their mum or their dad, their brother, their uncle, whoever it might be. And I've said to myself at the end of each of those five eulogies, I thought I knew the person. Because I heard so many different aspects of the person's life that we were celebrating and sharing in, that it made me sad that I didn't know as much as I knew about them. So I'm starting a campaign that we should hear each other's eulogies and a year before we die. Because there's certain things that intrigue us and we've got questions and we want to explore with them. So if you want to join my campaign, I put a petition at the back of church and I haven't, so don't look for it when you're getting coffee. I wish I knew more about them when they were alive. I think there were two main focuses in Paul's life, the apostle Paul's life. One was that he knew Jesus Christ more and more each day and that more and more people in the world would know Jesus Christ each day. That's why when we read in the book of Acts about his ministry and when we read his letters that he gets cheesed off with the church when they live in such a way, they share together in such a way that puts stumbling blocks in front of those people and hinder those people who are searching to know Jesus. And he gets really angry when false teachers and heretics infiltrate these communities with false teaching and turn people away from who Jesus really is. That's why he spends most of his time striving to know more about Jesus.

Paul had a close relationship with the church in Philippi. He founded it when he was there. You can read about it in Acts chapter 16. He spent time. He got to know the Christians in Philippi and they got to know him. He encouraged them and he challenged them. He taught them and he strengthened them.

[4:45] And his deepest desire was that they would get to know Jesus more intimately. So I want to ask you the question that I'm sure Paul would ask us if he were standing here at this lectern this morning. Do you know him? Do you know Jesus? Do you know the power of Jesus? Do you know the love of Jesus? Do you know the strength of Jesus? Do you know the peace of Jesus? Do you know the joy that comes from knowing Jesus?

Do you know him? I would hope that the answer that most of us would give is a yes, even if it's a qualified yes. And if you couldn't, if you can't say yes to that this morning, then I'm praying that you will discover the greatest treasure that there ever is, Jesus.

Paul would ask the same, do you know him? Do you know that Jesus? And the Greek word here for knowing that's written in this letter to the Philippians, this word, I want to know, this, that Paul writes, is not like an intellectual knowledge. The Greek word has a sort of a, the source of it is about a personal, experiential, intimate relationship. It's one that you don't get just from books and discussions with other people. It's one that you get when you immerse yourself into something. And so Paul writes, I want to know, I want to immerse myself, I want to dive in to Christ and know all about him, all that I can about him. My desire is to see him in me and living in me and through me each and every day. That's what Paul is saying when he says, I want to know

Christ. And from our perspective, we'd probably say to Paul, because you know everything, don't you? Because we're still reading your letters 2,000 years later. And if he was here, he would cut us down at that point and say, there's always more to discover. I have to keep striving to learn and to grow, Paul would say. And yet he knew that there was a cost, a cost to pursuing Christ daily. In Philippi, when he was there and he was founding the church, he was beaten and he was briefly imprisoned.

Wherever Paul went, there was hardship and hostility followed him as he introduced others to knowing Jesus. He wrote the letter to the Philippians whilst imprisoned in Rome. Paul obediently accepted all that was thrown at him, literally thrown at him. Because in those times of hardship and suffering, he discovered more about Jesus in his own life. So he writes, what is more?

[8:01] I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. Remember, he wrote that in chains.

What did he lose? Well, he lost prestige and power and respect and honour. All those things that were thrown at him and bestowed on him as a rising star of the religious elite.

And he writes this, if anyone thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, these are the few verses before chapter 7, verse 7, sorry. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more. Circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel to the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, in regard to the law of Pharisee, as for zeal, persecuting the church, as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. I've been pondering on that this week, about what he achieved, as it were, before he met Jesus. And I've tried to put myself in Paul's sandals and discovered how difficult it is to say what he said. I mean, I could stand up here and say I was born into a church family. My first visit to church was when I was eight days old.

I followed the footsteps of three family members in full-time church leadership. I've served the church locally and regionally and nationally and internationally. I've struggled to study and receive two theology degrees. I've been an ordained minister for 25 years. And what I want to say is, I've put some effort into this, people. I'd like a badge or a certificate or an Amazon gift voucher, something to recognise everything that I have put in over these last 25, 30 years.

And then I'm taking back a chapter in Philippians to that beautiful Christ hymn. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped.

[10:33] But made himself nothing. Made, taken the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

There was and there still is a cost to knowing Jesus and to following him. Think of the rich young ruler who wanted to follow Jesus and said, I've been following all of the laws, Jesus.

And Jesus said, you need to let go of everything that's precious to you. And he walked away, that rich young man, crestfallen.

But for Paul, the joy and the contentment of knowing Jesus far outweighed the cost of knowing Jesus. Sixteen times in this letter to the Philippians, Paul writes the words joy or rejoicing.

And they're used in describing knowing Jesus or being part of a fellowship, or even receiving the cost, the sufferings of following Jesus. Remember, he's writing in prison.

[11:41] His freedom is gone. Some commentators say that actually he was facing execution when he was writing this letter. And even at that point, he writes, there is joy in knowing Jesus.

For me, and maybe for you, we can often bypass the cost of following Jesus.

We make it easy for ourselves. And I think when we do that, we miss out on more of the joy and the rejoicing in following Jesus.

Joy is not just a happy feeling. I grew up in the Salvation Army. And on a Sunday evening, these services on a Sunday evening, there was always a time for testimony.

And so we'd sit there, and the leader would say, OK, now, has anybody got something to share? And we were all of the congregation. We'd look up to the side. Because there was this young, there was this old chap, quite small.

[12:49] And I never knew his name. We used to call him Testimony Tim. Because every Sunday, he used to say something. And he got really excited. He used to hop on his toes like this.

And he was Scottish. I'm not going to offend anybody by doing the accent. But his catchphrase was, and the love and the joy of God, it just bubbles up inside you.

And it used to sort of explode like a can of Coke that you've shaken and opened. Bubbles up inside you. And I used to look there and think, I don't want that kind of joy because you're a weirdo, my friend.

That was a precocious teenager saying that. But joy is deeper. It doesn't always bubble up inside us.

I want to read just a few sentences from somebody who's written about joy, or Paul's approach to joy in Philippians.

[13:52] And it's just, for me, it's just wonderful. And I didn't want you to miss out on what the blessing that I received from it. Joy, for Paul, is a theological concept. It is not necessarily the same as happiness, at least if by happiness we mean a mood that might be experienced in the moment.

Joy, in his understanding, isn't something transient, which comes and goes and depends on our levels of tiredness, or hunger, or physical activity.

Rather, it relates to the solidarity of his confidence in Christ. It comes from a level of security in God's grace.

It is the warmed heart that provides some kind of bedrock of hope. It's the certainty, deep down, somewhere inside us, that God is good all the time.

That doesn't mean we always feel particularly positive about life, faith, or even about God. In fact, it can be the firm foundation on which we stand, which can give us the confidence to lament, or even be angry with God, or at the state of the world.

[15:11] With that irremovable core of joy, we can suffer and agonise, and crucially, we can take the reality of suffering seriously.

With joy in Christ, deep in our being, we are freed from the need to be present, a happy front in all circumstances, or pretend that things are not as they are, but are equally freed from the need to despair.

God is good. Suffering is real. Hope is stronger. In a sense, joy is true faith, which can well up in moments of real happiness, and carry us through moments of sorrow.

Our greatest desire needs to be that we know Jesus Christ, and know him more each and every day, and so discovering deep, deep joy.

And of this, Paul writes, 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.

[16:39] Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it, but one thing I do, forgetting what is behind, and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal, to win the prize for which God has called me headwards, in Christ Jesus.

As we come into land, I'd just like to offer three things that maybe we can do this week that might enable us to know Christ Jesus more and more.

The first is, and it might sound a daft thing to say, an obvious thing to say, but focus on Jesus. Take some time just to reflect on who he is.

Be expectant to meet him, and to see him at work. Start the day by saying, if you don't already, with a little prayer like, Lord, today can I see something of you in me, and in others?

Read the Bible. Talk to others about Jesus. There's a famous Methodist minister, who passed away 20 or so years ago, Donald English, and within some Methodist circles, he's regarded as the fourth person of the Trinity.

[18:15] He was such an influential person, nationally, globally, but also to individuals, including myself. And he said he loved to go into Methodist ministers' studies, and look at their bookshelves, and see in which year they died.

Which year they stopped learning, stopped pushing themselves. And maybe that's a question that needs to be broadened out to each of us, and to me, me particularly.

When did our desire to know more of Jesus stop? So let's focus on Jesus this week. The second is that we should open ourselves up to be used by Jesus, however small that might be, or as you think may feel, insignificant.

In my first appointment in Colocots, which happened to be Donald English's only circuit appointment when he was alive, we had around 12 or 13 house groups.

And we used to gather the house group leaders together, and I wrote some material, or gathered some material, on the Book of Acts, and we spent, as a church, we spent six to eight months going through the Book of Acts, during the Sunday services, and house groups.

[19:46] And halfway through, or a third way through, I got the house group leaders together, just to see how it was going. And so I said to the house group leaders, how's it going? You know, is the material okay?

Am I pitching it right? And one lady said, Nick, three or four of us have been talking. Now usually, when somebody says that, it's not going to be positive.

And they had been. They'd been talking, they'd got together. And they said, we love this sort of learning about the Book of Acts, and what goes on, and we love the questions, but towards the end, what we don't like, is you saying, or asking the question, what impact is it going to make on, on your life this week?

We're going back to that, they just wanted head knowledge, and not sort of like heart knowledge, if you know, if you know what I mean. They wanted the intellectual knowledge, but they didn't want to change their lives.

In October, I'm doing the, I signed up to do the Western Half Marathon, and I can read all the articles, I like about running, I can have all the gear, I could have a hundred training apps, on my phone, but I won't know what it's really like, until I get out and run.

[21:04] I could have all the knowledge, in the world, about running a great, 13 point, whatever it is, miles, but that alone, won't get me over the finish line. I have to do it.

And I think it's the same, with knowing Jesus. We get to know Jesus, more and more, when we get out, and we serve him. When we step up, and step out.

When we put our trust in him, and allow his trust in us, to shape us, and transform us, and energise us. To get to know how Jesus works, and to get to know him more, we need to do the work of Jesus.

And that will be different, for each one of us. We need to be brave, we need to be committed, we need to be consistent. So we need to focus on Jesus, open ourselves up, to be used by Jesus, and finally, to receive from Jesus.

We need our, to allow ourselves, to be challenged, and changed, by Jesus. We need to look for ways, in which, this week, by God's grace, our lives, our very beings, can be transformed, into the likeness of Christ.

[22:22] A few times, Paul uses the analogy, of getting rid of dirty, filthy clothes, and putting on, the beautiful clothes, of God's character.

You'll remember these words, from Colossians. But now, you must also, rid yourselves, of all such things, as these. Anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language, from your lips.

Do not lie, to each other, since you have taken off, your old self, with its practices, and have put on, the new self, which is being renewed, in knowledge, in the image, of its creator.

Therefore, as God's, chosen people, holy, and dearly loved, clothe yourself, with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.

Bear with each other, and forgive one another, if any of you, has a grievance, against someone.

Forgive, as the Lord, forgave you, and over all these virtues, which binds them together, put on, like the overcoat, of love.

[23:36] My mum has a, has a good friend, called Cynthia, who's been a lifelong, follower of Jesus. And every morning, she lays in bed, and she says, okay Lord, what do you want me, to wear today?

And then she's, she feels led, to the, to her wardrobe, and she puts on, what she believes, God is asking her, to wear. Some days, God has very, strange, dress sense.

But actually, that's a, there's truth, in that question. Before we start the day, what clothes, shall I put on today, God? Will it be the dirty, filthy rags, of my old self?

Or will it be the beautiful clothes, that you give me, through your grace? Paul's deepest desire, was to know Christ, in every way.

And for others, to know Christ, for themselves. And that includes, you and me. may our desire, be the same, as Paul's. And may we join, with him, in saying, 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.

[25:00] And so, somehow, to attain, to the resurrection, of the dead. May we strive, to be more, like Jesus, in all we do, and all that we say.

And may we press on, towards that goal, until we see him, face to face. Let's pray together. I think God, we thank you, for the joy, of knowing you, in Christ Jesus.

Christ Jesus, we thank you, for the love, and the grace, and the mercy, shown through your life, and your ministry. And Holy Spirit, we thank you, that you, enable us, to draw closer, to God, our Heavenly Father.

We offer ourselves, to learn more, about you Jesus, day by day. And may you, in us, and through us, build your kingdom, here on earth, as it is in heaven.

in Jesus name we pray Amen