

# Knowing Me, Knowing You: Practising The Presence Of God - 8th May 2022

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[ 0 : 00 ] Hello, I'm Ruth. I'm the curate at St. John's Community Church, and it's a real pleasure to be with you here this morning. And in this season, we're doing a series of talks on knowing me, knowing you.

How many times can you do that? Come on. Forever. Abba is forever, it's true. And we're thinking about different ways of knowing God more deeply, knowing ourselves more honestly, and knowing each other more lovingly.

So this week, I'm going to talk to you about a very contemplative way of relating to God. It works for me. Well, I'd say I was probably, last week we chose, we moved around the room and identified whether we were head people, heart people, kingdom people, or contemplative people.

And on average, I'm a kingdom person in that that's where God speaks to me most obviously. But my food comes from here, comes from the contemplative. It works for me.

You might, in fact, find this unbearably naff. So don't worry. That's okay. I know that you are all hearty heart people. I'm going to talk about something which is called practicing the presence of God.

[ 1 : 10 ] And to get into that, we're going to start by looking at a little passage, which is part of the story of Jacob in Genesis 28. So that's like a pressy of it on the screen.

It's for reference. But I'm just going to set the scene a bit before then. So Jacob has literally just defrauded his brother of all of his inheritance and his father's blessing through this kind of potent mixture of really good cooking and taking advantage of his father's disability.

Jacob's now on the run. He hasn't got any survival skills at all. We hear that his brother is the one that does hunting and fishing, whereas Jacob is kind of the more of the housekeeper son.

And he's got no places to turn because he's alienated almost everybody in his life. So we see him kind of crashing out at the side of the road using a long, flat rock as a pillow.

So let's read. This isn't quite all the text on the screen. It's a little bit of a long passage, so fitting it on was a pain. So Jacob left Beersheba and went out to Haran.

[ 2 : 15 ] When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because he was tired and the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep.

He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the Lord, and he said, I am the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac.

I will give you and your descendants the land on which you're lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will be spread out to the east and to the west, to the north and the south.

All the peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I'm with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land.

I will not leave you until I've done what I've promised to you. When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, surely God is in this place, and I wasn't aware of it.

[ 3 : 18 ] He was afraid and said, how awesome is this place? This is none other than the house of God. This is the gate to heaven. Early the next morning, Jacob took the stone he'd placed under his bed and set it up as a pillar.

He poured oil over it, and he called that place Bessel, though the city used to be called Luz. Then Jacob made a vow, Now, if God will be with me and watch over me on this journey that I'm taking, and give me food to eat and clothes to wear, so that I can safely return to my father's household,

then the Lord will be my God.

And this stone that I've set up as a pillar will be God's house. Out of all that you give me, I will give you a tenth. Now, this is a really big passage. It's a passage which a lot of people spend a long time worrying about, fiddling through the niggly bits, especially people from the Jewish tradition, but we're actually only going to focus in on one verse today, which is number 16, which is where Jacob wakes up and says, God is in this place, and I wasn't aware of that.

So I wonder, have you ever felt like that? Suddenly realized that God is with you? In the early Twitters of the Dawn chorus, like the faint sound of music when someone's playing the piano in the background of a train station, just a niggling feeling in the background that God is there somewhere, walking in the garden with you.

Now, I don't know about you, but I tend to get these niggling feelings when I've basically been too hasty, too worried, too surrounded by bitty tasks that just have to be done.

[ 4 : 55 ] And I don't know whether it's self-absorption or little cycles of worry turning in my head like washing machines running round and round, or when I'm ashamed or hasty, but somehow being busy, feeling guilty, obsessing over the things happening to me, I find these things build up around me and create walls around me, so I can't see very much apart from the wall of guilt or fear or busyness.

And when that happens, I find, on average, I'm not really noticing other people, let alone God. And then, at those points, eventually, it all builds up too much and God breaks through.

And I guess, in an extreme way, that's what's happened to Jacob. I mean, he's been on the run, scheming to defraud his dad for months, trapped behind walls of plots and selfish desires, and after that, he's been running, filled with fear and haste.

And then, at the end of the day, Jacob's forced to stop. He's run all day. He hasn't got any more schemes or plots to fill his head. And when he's finally stopped, when he crashes out exhausted, God slips through the cracks in the walls that Jacob has built around himself.

And at first, God breaks in through Jacob's dreams, when Jacob's subconscious mind has finally stilled from fretting, and there is space for God to speak in the midst of the internal monologue that Jacob probably have.

[ 6 : 19 ] When Jacob wakes, he remembers God breaking through the cracks. He remembers the dream, and sometimes God does speak through dreams. More on that from me, perhaps, another day.

But breaking through or not, whether we notice or not, actually, God is always there. The walls we build, which prevent us from seeing God, are in our heads, in our minds, in our hearts, always and everywhere.

The reality is that God is so vast that he is encircled around entire galaxies, and yet also up close and personal enough to see every small cackle of laughter to bhorse behind every smile, every tear falling.

This indescribably huge and yet personal God is always there, if only we could always notice. And to be honest, there are some situations in which it feels easier to see God.

It feels easier to see God when we really need God. It feels easier to see God when we stop, when we pause, when we're in beautiful places, nature, when we've got time to see God.

[ 7 : 26 ] And it's actually harder to see God in the day-to-day, at the desk, at work, in front of the screen, in the midst of millions of to-do lists. And I guess for me, that's where the idea of practicing the presence of God comes in.

So I'm going to tell you a little bit about it in depth, but I'm just going to give you a couple of examples of how I practice the presence of God in my life. So I guess first, the first practice that takes me through the day is when I drink my second cup of coffee of the day.

Now honestly, at this point, I'm enough of an addict that the first one does nothing. I just suck it up like a zombie. But when I get that second cup of coffee and I feel it quicken my pulse of touch, yes, I know, it's probably not good for me, I say to me, Christ, be within me.

Make your home in my heart that I can be grounded in love. And I guess the second practice that I kind of carry with me is when I'm worried about something.

So I guess something like the many interviews that are involved in becoming a vicar many, many interviews, very personal. And they often panicked me a bit.

[ 8 : 41 ] In fact, the one I did with the local area person called Ramita here, I was calling her on Zoom and my hand was shaking so much she just said, let's just turn the video off because I can't

see anything anyway.

She was very kind to me. But I say something in those moments of panic to remind me that God is there. something like, calm me, God, like you calm the storm. And it sounds trite, but it does work. It doesn't always stop the shakes, but it opens up the possibilities. Makes me feel less like I'm chasing my tail and more like I can see this in a big perspective. And you might think that these little sayings are trite, that they're repeated, that they're naff, but they are little touchstones which ground me and remind me that God is there even if I'm not feeling like God is there in that moment. They're little reminders that there are some things that you hold so tightly that you don't make any space to listen. So they're a reminder that God is there and just to let go a little bit.

So this is a practice called practicing the presence of God. It's developed by a monk called Father Lawrence. He basically wanted a way out of morning prayer. You can look him up.

[ 9 : 55 ] And so he decided that he found God in the washing up. The clue in the name is that it's a practice. It doesn't just come to you. You have to keep coming back to it. It's traditionally seen as a kind of stepping stone towards praying without ceasing, always being aware that God is there.

But I think that's a very high bar for anyone. And I'm certainly a long way away from that. Practicing the presence is a very contemplative tradition. After all, at the very heart of the contemplative, there's the kind of prayer where you just kind of enter the depths and sit looking at God while God sits looking at you.

And I guess one of the key things about practicing the presence of God is that you don't always catch the feels. It's not a heart tradition. Indeed, there are some spiritual thinkers who would say if you get too reliant on feelings with prayer, then God takes them away for a bit so that you don't depend on them.

Certainly that's happened to me in the past. So we're going to have a little bit of a go. Maybe closing your eyes might help and I'm just going to do a little bit of a meditation now.

loving God, thank you that you are here. Open our hearts and our minds to receive you.

[ 11 : 19 ] Still us and help us turn from anything that may distract you. So I'd like to suggest that you all kind of open your hands, maybe putting your palms up turned on your laps in a gesture of receptivity.

and hear these words. Know that God is over all that has been, all that is and all to come.

But we meet God here in the now and the present. We bring our whole selves to God now. All right. I'd like to invite you all to clench both your hands into fists quite hard if you can. So start by thinking about your left hand clenched as a fist.

Be aware of all the things from the past moments and days, the things right now that are occupying your thoughts and feelings. Imagine yourself holding them tightly in your left hand.

[ 12 : 34 ] Think about your closed hand and how, because it's closed, it signifies that you aren't allowing space for God into it. And in your own time, gradually relax your left hand and turn your left palm up as you release these occupying thoughts, feelings, and events into the care of Christ.

Now, think a little bit about your right hand, which should still be clenched into a fist. Become aware of all the things that are ahead of you that are going to happen, the concerns, the feelings, the worries, the to-do lists, and even the things that you're looking forward to or you're hopeful about. Imagine you're clenching all of these things into your right hand. your right hand. Your right hand's getting tired.

When you're ready to open your right hand, see this as a symbol of letting go of these future events and hopes into the care of Christ. And now you've let all of that go, we're just going to take a couple of minutes of still silence to see what God has to say in the space that you've let him into.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[ 15 : 28 ] And hear these words again.

Know that God is over all that has been, all that is, and all that is to come. Amen. Amen.