

Knowing Me, Knowing You: A Long, Loving Look At The Real - 12th June 2022

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Preacher: Ian McKeown

- [0 : 00] Well, it's lovely, it is lovely to be here, and it's lovely to see everybody. Good morning. We're continuing our series this morning with Knowing Me, Knowing You.
- So here is the fab four themselves, ABBA. Come on then, in order of appearance, give me the names. Who have we got here? Just shout them out if you know them.
- Agnetta, who's the next one? Is it Bjorn or is it Benny? I think it's Benny. I think it's Benny. Yeah, I think Bjorn's the next one. And then Frida.
- Yeah, absolutely. Well done. Nice one, Lottie. That's right. Well, actually, no, that's not right. Because these four images are actually digitally rendered abatars, if you will, of the band members that played, well, for want of a better word, a concert in Wembley last month.
- And by all accounts, they absolutely smashed it. In fact, let me just show you this. That is an image from the concert, okay, last month of Agnethea at the concert, 45 years after that single, Knowing Me, Knowing You, was actually released.
- [1 : 23] And if you're interested, this concert is running five nights a week for the next year. And to host the show, they've even built their own ABBA arena.
- Strangely enough, Matt, just outside West Ham. I don't know if you knew that. Yeah, you could get a match in and then take the show as well. I'll mention all of this by way of introduction because of what we're looking at this morning.
- Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes Turn and face the strange Ch-ch-ch-changes Don't tell them to grow up on all events Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes Turn and face the strange Ch-ch-ch-changes Where's your shame?
- Your left is up to an accident Time may change me But you can twist time Strange fascination Fascinating me A bit scary really, isn't it?
- Just watching that happen so fast. But of course, it's not just the physical changes that we go through as we get older. You know, more wrinkles on our faces. That just shows that, you know, all the times that we were laughing and smiling, I think.
- [2 : 41] But the dodgy knees and the aching back is not so much fun. But the physical stuff aside, this morning we're going to take a look at the different phases our life maybe goes through as we grow and hopefully mature and change through that process.
- So just keeping the bowie theme for a moment. Here's a quote from the man himself that I came across which I thought was quite profound.
- What about that? I think aging is an extraordinary process where you become the person you always should have been. It's good, isn't it?
- It's something in that. And just putting that into the context of our faith, and we'll look at some verses from Paul to the Corinthian church that speak to the same idea as this.
- Okay? I just find it a really powerful perspective that as we journey through this life, we are moving towards growing into the person God always intended us to be.

- [3 : 49] But at the same time, I'm also thinking, how does all that work out? And of course it's a mystery, isn't it? Because we don't know how all this is going to unfold.
- So there's just a tension. There's a tension, a real tension. And we have to live in the middle of that tension. And I guess the word that Jesus uses to, one of the meanings behind it, to describe that is faith.
- So in all the things that have happened, and all the things that will happen, and the wonderful but sometimes quite painful stuff. In fact, because of all that painful stuff often, we change.
- And that, I think, is the plan. And I know plans often don't go the way we thought they were going to go, do they?
- Okay? Who knows? Who knows? But there you go. That's the tension kicking in. And we have to hold it. I guess what I've learned over the years is that if we're open to moving towards God, he holds us in all of this.
- [5 : 09] There's a beautiful passage in Colossians chapter 3 that over the years I've gone back to. Okay? Because it's been really powerful for me. And it's really spoken to me.
- And it's where it says we are hidden in Christ. And it's like we are wonderfully held in God's hands.
- And often we don't even realise it. But we are. And we are hidden even from ourselves.
- How about that? We are hidden from ourselves. So even we don't know our true identity. We don't have all the answers.
- In some ways, do you know what I've learned? Is I don't want all the answers. Because they're often too simplistic. I just know that I need to put myself in a place where I can be more aware and recognise God's presence.
- [6 : 15] Wherever I go and whoever I'm with. You know, and I'm just a learner. Okay? Trying to kind of get that sensitivity.
- But I know there are others here at St. John's who've spent a lot of time. A lot of time. Doing and practising exactly that. And I think we are a richer and deeper church because of that.
- So let me ask you a question. If you could wind the clock back to your younger self. Okay? However many years ago that is for you. I'm not going to make the decision on that.
- Whatever you think is your younger self. What advice would you give to yourself? What would you want to tell your younger self?
- Just have a think. Just for a moment. If you want to shout something out, that's fine. But you don't have to. But what would you say to your younger self? I'll share with you some of my bits in a bit.
- [7 : 21] But let me just show you a clip. It's taken from Radio 4's Women's Hour. And it's a number of fairly well-known celebrities that have been part of the Radio 4 programme.
- Just sharing their thoughts on that very question. If I could go back and talk to my younger self, I would say... Be brave, because fortune favours the brave.
- Wear sunblock. Totally ignore my father. Lighten up. Don't forget to smile. Enjoy the ride. I'd want to just, like, give her a hug.
- And tell her not to worry. It would be not to worry so much. Not to stress or worry. Worryless. I'd tell my younger self to worry less. And to have fun.
- Chill, sis. Chill, kid. Relax. It'll be alright. There is light at the end of the tunnel. Things will start to fall into place. I'm not sure when and where.

[8 : 22] Stop stressing so much. If you worry yourself about it, you're just going to make things worse. You think, oh, I don't know what I'm going to do. And what am I going to become? And how can I escape?

It takes you a while before you settle into thinking, this is my life. It's nobody else's. And I'm going to have as much fun as I can. I wouldn't have wanted to give my younger self any advice because I wouldn't have gotten where I am.

Even every mistake you make leads to kind of learning something and becoming stronger. I wouldn't say I have zero regrets in my life. But I do think that there are, you know, things that you learn in your 20s that are very valuable in your 30s.

Never wait to be rescued by a knight in shining Armani. Stand on your own two stilettos. Do not take your cues from other people's thoughts of you because they will change.

One minute people will really love you. The next minute people will really hate you. Just stay true to you and clean your room. It will be difficult. It's a hard road and you need perseverance.

[9 : 26] But don't be afraid because there will always be surprising people to help you along the way. No one gets anywhere alone. So it's important to surround yourself with positive people, the right network and team.

Your female friends are your human wonder bras. Uplifting, supportive and making each other look bigger and better. If something looks completely impossible, it's probably the very thing you should be doing.

So don't say no too quickly. People procrastinate a lot and they tell themselves many reasons why they can't start something or do something. You don't always have to get things perfect.

You know, you just have to get going. If you just stick to what your, you know, heart's desire is and make sure it's the real thing rather than just showing off or being a narcissist, then there'll be kind of a reward at the end.

You can be naughty and you can be funny. You can be cheeky and you can push boundaries. But if you stick with something that's good and know that you're doing right, the world will look after you, my darling.

[10 : 31] One day you'll wake up and you won't care so much about what everyone else thinks about you. You'll do you and you'll be authentic and you'll be raw and you'll be amazing.

Anything ring true for you there, I wonder? Yeah, a couple of things. Just, yeah, that's me. I never would have listened to cleaning my room, you know, because come and see our best room now and you'll know why.

I think for me, though, you know, if I could tell my youngest self something, it would be like, don't worry about stuff so much. Because I did, and I still do, I mean, we do, don't we? And to be more confident, because actually you're a lot more capable than you realise.

It took me a long time to sort of get that. And the other thing actually is about trusting that you need other people. You need other people around you to help you. For me, a large part of what it means to be part of, you know, this family, this body here at St. John's, is that we are made up of so many different types of people with different experiences and different backgrounds and come from different ages, and that's really healthy.

Because if we are going to grow up collectively, and that's what we do as a church, okay, we grow collectively in our faith, then we need to be willing, don't we, to share the ups and downs.

[11 : 57] We need to listen to each other's experiences, and maybe to offer, you know, support or advice, or maybe just to be there, just be there. Sometimes just to be kind.

And of course it goes both ways. So this isn't just about, you know, older people telling younger people. Yeah, the wisdom that usually, but not always, comes with experience and age.

And I'm thinking of times when someone with a few more years, maybe on the clock, you know, has taken time to listen, maybe to comfort, to pray for us.

And you know, you know, you know, you know, don't you, when it's someone with you who gets it, who understands you, and has already been through what maybe you're experiencing right now.

Lisa often reminds me, it's my wife Lisa, often reminds me of what her dad, Jack, used to say when she, when she was younger, and when we as a couple, been through some tough times, particularly some health issues with the children, our two boys, and with a very kind, those of you who knew Jack, with a kind smile, and born out of many years that he'd been in and out of hospital as he grew up.

[13 : 19] So he was no stranger to having to endure all sorts of challenges in his life. He would say, it will pass.

I know how terrible it feels right now, but it's not forever. It will pass. And you know, sometimes that can be like a word actually being spoken over us.

It's really, really powerful. And equally, it goes the other way, doesn't it? You know, there's just something in the kind of the innocent playfulness of a toddler and yeah, I know, they can be totally exhausting, okay?

Do what Lisa's dad used to do when our two boys got a bit noisy, he used to turn down his hearing aid. But it can be like a new lease of life.

And it certainly was for Jack. Rekindling that kind of inner joy and laughter. You know, the little boy in you, the little girl in you. It just catches you.

[14 : 25] Stop being so serious. Stop being so serious. Just lighten up. I think a good image to have as we think about growing and changing is this.

The rings on a tree trunk. You know, each year, another layer gets laid down, doesn't it, around its base to provide extra strength and support to the tree.

And all of the rings, okay, all of them are important. And I think that goes for us too. They're all part of who we are.

And in the natural world, when it floods or when there's fires or when that happens, you can often see the effect actually show itself through in the rings. And I think it's the same for us.

Our experiences in life lay down layers. They shape us. They change us. Maybe there's some cracks in there. Difficult times.

[15 : 25] Times of illness. Times of grief. And hard as it might be to understand when you're in the thick of all these things that are going on, very often it is in those very things that God can use them to change and transform us.

Sometimes I think that is how we learn to be more patient. We learn to be more forgiving. We make more room for grace and mercy in our lives rather than rushing to judge things.

Let me just read to you from Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.

Now the Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory are being transformed into his image with ever increasing glory which comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

So Paul's talking about living in this, the way he describes it, unveiled life. And I think he's harking back here to the story in Exodus 34.

[16 : 52] Okay, I don't know what you can actually see there. There's actually a statue behind that of Moses. Exodus 34 describes how Moses came down from Mount Sinai after talking to God and his face was literally shining.

The word is Shekinah. Okay, the reflection of God's glory. And it totally freaked out the Israelites. Even his brother, Aaron, was too afraid to come near him.

And they made him put a veil over his face to hide that divine glow. They just couldn't handle it. So when Moses would talk to the people, he would cover his face.

And when he talked to God, although not face to face, he took the veil off. Moses was changed.

Okay, the word in Greek that's in there is metamorpho. And it's the same word that's used in transfiguration. Okay, when Jesus is at the mountain, transfiguration.

[17 : 57] Moses was a different person after talking to God so directly. And I think that's what Paul is getting at here. When we take a long, loving look at the real, and by that I mean what God values, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, and self-control.

Okay, so what we call the fruits of the Spirit. We are, from one degree of glory to another, which some translations put for this passage, we are changed.

I see that when I look at some people. I can see it. I don't know if you've ever had that experience. You've just, you meet people. I mean, I hope that there are times in our life when we show that as well.

People can see it in us. Something is just different. And I think that's a reflection of this idea of the Shekinah. It might not be an actual, you know, like a beacon on your head.

Okay. But something is shining through about who we are. And that makes people realize that there's something different there.

[19 : 19] So living this unveiled life then, this journey, we make encountering the living God in all sorts of places and with all sorts of people.

And I think, I wasn't here last week to hear Matt's talk, but I did listen to it. Just let you know, Matt. Okay. And like he was sharing last week about the spirit prompting him to recognize and see the real worth, okay, and value of the guy that was cleaning the concourse at Birmingham New Street.

That's what it's about. Now, every encounter with God has the possibility, doesn't it, to change us, to make us more like him. And every taste we get of this presence that fills us with love, there's a sense in which that kind of just naturally spills out.

It just happens. You can't even stop it. It will happen. Now, I know, and you know, that knowing this and living this are not necessarily the same thing.

I've never really felt that this path of change, this road towards maturity, whatever you want to call it, at least for me anyway, I don't know if this rings true for you, it's never been a straight one.

[20 : 41] Okay. It's never been simple. There's been plenty of detours. There's been doubling back. Okay. You think you're going forward, but actually you end up heading backwards and then hanging around in the wilderness.

I've done a lot of that. And so it's not so much been the dazzling Shekinah of God reflected, but maybe something a bit more like a dim nine-watt bulb, you know, faintly glowing sometimes.

And yet, I know this isn't a sprint. Okay. It's a marathon. And there's going to be highs and lows.

Okay. Staying in the race, to use another passage from the Bible, is what matters. Staying in the race. As you might imagine, there are kind of different ways that people have thought about this faith journey that we're on.

And there are at least two, you know, for some, six different phases we go through. Now, I've got to be honest with you, I'm not a big fan of spiritual frameworks.

[21 : 52] They just don't do a lot for me. Because I think life is usually so much more messy and complicated than a diagram. Okay. If only it was that simple.

But very roughly, these go from what's been called institutional to questioning to mystical or contemplative faith.

Okay. I think just from the outside, just to say we need to recognize that these are all important. We need to kind of embrace that each phase is an important part of laying down those rings.

You know, because we don't want to get into any sort of spiritual superiority nonsense. Because it just doesn't work that way. It's not how it works. So, if we think about sort of our early spiritual formation, there's a theologian, some of you may know, and writer called Richard Rohr.

And he puts it this way. So, early on in our spiritual journey, we have to establish our identity, our security, if you want. And that means we need to know where the boundaries are.

[23 : 04] We need to be able to build that. And to at least get a minimum sense of order and some sort of structure to our faith. And when I sort of think back to when I first became a Christian about, well, 33 years ago, you know, I was like a sponge.

I was soaking everything up. Probably some really bad stuff, actually, or some really good stuff. You know, so it wasn't, it was a mix. But I just needed, I kind of wanted to know more and more and more.

Because I wanted to know where the markers were. I kind of wanted, I wanted to understand what my faith was actually all about. And I was doing what Richard Rohr describes as building my container, okay, for my identity as a Christian and as part of a new fellowship.

Do you know what? That's totally necessary. We all need to go through something like that, okay? It's a really, really important part of, you know, early formation. And naturally, quite naturally, we get shaped, don't we, by the people that are around us and by the norms and practices of the community, the church community that we're part of.

And sometimes, and in some churches, that can become quite rigid. You know, you kind of develop this strong sense of binary.

[24 : 27] So right, wrong. True, false. In, out. Us, them. I call it the inies and the outies. Everything is very black and white.

Right. Do you know, I think for people looking from the outside into the church and when they see maybe this, well, obviously not the zebra, but you know what I mean.

Metaphorically speaking. I don't think it's terribly attractive. I don't. I think it can look quite judgmental. You know, it's our way or the highway.

But the thing is, it is a necessary part of starting the journey. Okay. So having clearly defined boundaries is important for our safety.

So I think, you know, and this is just, this is for all of us. We need to be, we need to give people space and we need to exercise some patience about, you know, we're at different points.

[25 : 32] You know, it might be a good place to start, but it's not really a very good place to finish. Over time, of course, we question things.

Start to question stuff. Our experiences don't quite match up to this black and white way of looking at things. There's more subtlety, isn't there?

When you actually start living life, you realise there's a lot more subtlety. Okay. The nuance in the world. And that reflects, I think, in the way that we read and understand the Bible as well.

There's all this diversity of literature, of language and history and culture in the Bible. And it's just a lot, lot more complex than just sort of applying very literal interpretations to it.

Not very helpful. You know, I think for me, it started sort of this kind of transition. It started with trying to come to grips with parts of the Bible.

[26 : 36] You know, particularly in the Old Testament. Let me just read to you part of Psalm 137. This one didn't help. Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.

Okay. I'm sure you're familiar with that one. You know, it's difficult, isn't it, to put, thus says the word of the Lord after that. That can't be right. That can't be right. And then there were those incredibly subversive parables that Jesus taught.

Like the parable of the vineyard workers. And for a while, you know, I used to struggle with that. Why shouldn't people be paid fairly for what they do?

And it's not until you let go of that sort of black and white thinking. And then it's like you can hear God whispering in your ear. Why are you so envious that I'm so generous?

Oh. Pow. Pow. The parable then lands. It starts there.

[27 : 46] But then I think gradually I found myself, you know, I just found myself living out a more generous, how I saw it, grace-driven understanding of my faith. And I suppose some of my experiences that I, you know, I had.

Prayer not working out the way I thought it should. Becoming a dad, that'll change you. And then in about 2003, 2004, I was really struggling to put a handle on what was happening spiritually for me.

I knew things just weren't right. But I didn't know how to put that into words. There was a sense, you know, if I'm honest, there was a sense in which I was losing my faith.

And then, and this wasn't, this is by no means the only thing, but I'll just show you this. But then I came across a book. Okay, so this is 2003, 2004.

It's called A New Kind of Christian. Some of you might have read it. It's by a pastor in America. He's a teacher, but also a theologian, called Brian McLaren.

[28 : 55] It's about an American pastor struggling with his faith, and in particular, the institutional church that he's part of. Do you know, and as I read this, I felt a lightness in my spirit.

I mean, I'm going back nearly 20 years now. Because I knew I wasn't alone. There were other people out there struggling with this as well. And for me, that was a, it was an important transition point.

Okay, nearly 20 years ago. And I ended up going to lots of talks. I actually met Brian McLaren. I had a really, quite an interesting chat with him, and I found that really helpful. And I did all sorts of things.

Met quite a few different people to kind of talk that through. And it was, you know, I was in a journey there where I was just trying to understand and explore this kind of new understanding of what my faith might actually look like.

Because that's a bit scary. Because you're going outside of the kind of, the boundaries that you've had. Richard Rohr actually describes part of this process as falling upwards.

[30 : 09] Sounds a bit odd. It's a crisis point. And something has to go. Something has to die. Something has to finish for something new to come. And you realise, you realise that the container you built in that first part is actually really important.

It's not going to work anymore, but it's actually really important. Because it's strong enough to hold you as you go into the transition of the next part.

That's kind of, kind of, was my experience. Let me just, I'll just very briefly read to you a quote from his book. Most of us tend to think of the second half of life as largely about getting old.

Dealing with health issues and letting go of our physical life. But the whole thesis of this book is exactly the opposite. What looks like falling can largely be experienced as falling upward.

Into a broader and deeper world. Where the soul has found its fullness. And is finally connected to the whole. And lives inside the bigger picture.

[31 : 23] I think as you do that, you know. And, you know, as I say, I think we're kind of all different places and different parts of our journey. But I think as you do that, you accept there's a whole lot more grey out there.

And you start seeing things and people and situations differently. And you certainly don't rush to judge things. You don't need to divide things up into, you know, in and out.

Them and us. Why would I do that? Why would I want to do that? And holding the tension then becomes just less of a struggle.

And for me, the only way I can put this is that grace and mercy kind of takes centre stage.

And it's also, I think, a move towards a more interior and reflective you. Which is, you know, good news for the introverts out there.

[32 : 27] Which I think, Matt, you're going to be looking at next week. The Jesuit, Walter Bruchard, once described this turn towards contemplation as taking a long, loving look at the real.

And by long, I think what he means is that this is a sustained gaze. Okay? It's not a glance. It requires time and focus.

And the willingness to be present. You know, I'm guilty as everybody else is. But I guess, you know, our mobile phones, not helpful.

Not helpful in that respect. You know, we're losing something because of this 24-7 connectivity. We're so continually distracted. This is the opposite.

And then, loving look. Sounds easy, doesn't it, to say loving, yeah? But, you know, I think, I know this is true of me, so I don't know, maybe it's not true of you.

[33 : 37] But I think that we're kind of hardwired to be more critical than we are to be loving. It's where we go. I just think that's, and actually learning to be loving is a really, it's a whole kind of thing.

And it takes a long time. So the purpose, I think, of what Burghardt is saying here is be completely absorbed by what we're actually, what is the object of our contemplation, what we're contemplating.

Look, but don't judge. Just be open to the spirit prompting what you really, really need to see.

And then look at the real or real. Again, not so easy. I suspect we're quite good at fooling ourselves.

You know, I know I am. About what is actually real. And maybe I'm afraid that if I see the real, I might have to do something about it or change. It's going to be difficult.

[34 : 46] Okay. So here's something silly. Here's something, here's a silly thing. Okay. Or maybe not. For you to do this week. Try to be present to something.

Okay. Okay. I've, well, I've put here, I've just said it could be anything, but it just could be a little sparrow hopping about on the grass.

Honor God in that. Just be present. Be content. That it's part of God's creation.

Love it. Let it be for you in that moment. Reality. Don't judge it up.

Don't judge it down. Okay. Big sparrow, little sparrow, whatever. Don't analyze it. It's just a sparrow. That God has created.

[35 : 50] And you're probably the first person to gaze upon it and just delight in it. Let me close by reading you a quote from a lady called Marjorie Thompson who writes a lot in this area.

In contemplation, we move from communicating with God through speech to communing with God through the gaze of love.

Words fall away. Words fall away and the most palpable reality is being present to the lover of our souls. When we let go of all effort to speak or even to listen, simply becoming quiet before God, the spirit is free to work its healing mysteries in us, releasing us, energizing new patterns of life, restoring our soul's beauty.

And it is here that we allow ourselves to be loved by God into wholeness. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.