

Knowing Jesus Christ

John 12:9-19

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This morning I would like to speak about knowing God; knowing Jesus Christ. The story of Palm Sunday is about people who know Jesus - and we see how they respond very differently. The crowds know him, and they cheer for him. The chief priest and the Pharisees, they know him, and they want to kill him. And the disciples, they know him, and they do not understand him.

How about us? How do we know him?

1. What motivates the large crowd

The time of the great Passover feast was at hand. Israel was reminded again that God with his strong hand had saved Israel from slavery and misery in Egypt. And now, hope was in the air. Look at the amazing miracles that Jesus had been doing on his way from Galilee to Jerusalem.

They were very close to Jerusalem now, and together with the other pilgrims from Israel and from all over the world, they clogged the narrow roads leading up to Jerusalem.

Many crowds had gathered around Jesus especially, his raising of Lazarus from the dead was the talk of the day. If I would raise someone from the dead in public this afternoon, that would probably also lead to some recognition and I could finally begin my TV preaching ministry?

We have read the story of this joyful gathering that slowly moved to Jerusalem from the Gospel of John. He does not give us as much information as Mathew, Mark and Luke do - John assumes his readers already know the details.

He only mentions that the people took branches of palm trees, and they even came out of Jerusalem to greet him. They formed a welcoming committee, crying out, 'Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!'

And Jesus rode a donkey, as it was foretold, 'Fear not, daughter of Zion, behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!'

The people who accompanied Jesus were extremely excited - and they picked out exactly the right verses from the Psalms to welcome him. Intuitively they realised that what was happening here was big!

They saw Jesus and linked him with the beautiful promises from their Holy Scriptures.

But John is not altogether positive concerning these crowds. He states that they had gathered 'not only on account of Jesus, but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.'

They liked Jesus, but for most, it was the miracle worker they saw. Isn't this how we like our politicians, religious leaders, any leaders? As long as they can do economic miracles for us and provide security, we like them. We like successful people, especially if their success is good for us.

The crowds liked Jesus as the miracle worker. We want such people to be our kings!

Of course, this is not altogether wrong. Not at all. We are people with great needs, and there is nothing wrong with going to God, to Jesus, and asking for his help. Like those crowds, we sing Hosanna. 'Lord, save us'. You are the king, you can do it. So please save us from our sins, our sicknesses, our enemies, provide for all our needs.

But if this is all we seek Jesus for, we are in danger. If we only see him as the one who can give us what we need, and that based on our own views of what we really need, we only envision him very partially. And that can be dangerous.

We are all on a learning curve when it comes to knowing our Lord Jesus Christ, so no-one is perfect and no-one will ever be able to say that he knows it all. But we must continue to move forward on this learning curve.

The crowds had misguided expectations of Jesus. They assumed he would give them what they wanted - for instance, political freedom. When a few days later Jesus was arrested by the political oppressors, by the Romans and the Jewish leadership, the same crowds turned against Jesus.

A bit like us, when politicians are elected to the presidency with great support from the people. But when jobs are lost, when the economy goes south, when the president proves to be human after all, the people turn just as easily against him.

The people who had seen the miracle of Lazarus being raised from the dead and who shouted 'Hosanna to the King', very soon began to shout 'crucify him' when he was arrested and seemed weak.

But this is not so strange! I often see Christians who start to have real doubts when our Lord does not give them all the things they ask for.

If we have a one-sided view of our Lord, as if he exists to grant us all we want, we can get so disappointed, and even turn away from Him. This is one reason why I find the health and wealth theology such a problem. It promises what it cannot deliver, and then it may seem that something is wrong with our Lord.

But that is not because of who he is, but because we have a rather one-sided, distorted view of Him and of reality.

2. People who seem to know it all - Chief Priests and The Pharisees

The chief-priests and the Pharisees are also important actors in our story today. They were not like the crowds, they had studied theology. They were the intellectual and religious elites of the day. Serious men!

They had their theological systems perfectly worked out in their minds and in their traditions.

They saw Lazarus, and Jesus, and like the crowds, they also knew that this was big. Something extraordinary was happening. They did not deny the facts.

But the facts clashed with their theological systems and with their efforts to hold on to power. The crowds clamoured for change, but these religious leaders were afraid of change - as it would cost them their positions.

The religious leaders wanted to maintain the status quo, for they believed they saw the bigger picture, and they believed that they had it all figured out.

The Jesus in the minds of the masses can be one-sided and this is dangerous. But the Jesus of those who want no change and who think they know it all, is just as one-sided, and this is dangerous as well.

People who have a clear vision of how all things must be, people with a distinct vision or concept of how the future must be, can be a danger. In politics this is true, whether politicians are from the left or the right. As soon as people are fully convinced that they have a true, call it, divine vision, of what their country should look like, you have to be careful.

People with such a clear vision of what they want to reach in the state, are often prepared to wipe others off their drawings boards. We have seen that in fascism - no space for Jews in Hitler's grand view of the future. And in communism, where people with wealth were sent to the gulags.

We see it in a country like Sudan, where there is no space for Christians as the Islamic view does not leave much space for pluralism.

We see it with the chief priests and Pharisees in the time of Jesus. Their idea of religion did not leave any space for Lazarus or for Jesus. Lazarus had to be killed. Jesus raised him from the dead, but the religious leaders wanted Lazarus dead. His presence obviously underlined the

miracle, and for these religious leaders, such a miracle was bad news. It made people believe in Jesus and Jesus also had to be killed.

Is this not amazing? With their own eyes they saw the miracle, and yet, because it did not fit in their religious views, they preferred to deny reality, even kill to destroy the evidence, for the sake of their own concept of religion, which they had constructed so diligently.

Just as many theologians today have killed the real Jesus. If he does not fit in our modern, liberal views, we simply deny him. We deny his divinity, we deny his physical resurrection, and we deny the idea that it is through Jesus we get access to God, now and for eternity.

And this is also true of people who know it all in an orthodox manner. To think that with our carefully composed formulas we are able to perfectly describe and define God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, means that we frame Him in a box.

That is like taming God, making him harmless. He is precisely as we think he is... creating God in our own image! Conservative, orthodox Christians who have it all figured out can also really have a distorted view of God and Jesus."

3. The disciples

We read of the disciples of Jesus, that even though they were so close to him, they did not understand all that was happening. Sure, later they would have more comprehension, as with hindsight they were able to interpret the events of Palm Sunday in the light of the prophecies of the Old Testament.

But that was later, when our Lord Jesus Christ had opened their eyes to the fact that the Old Testament really speaks of Him, the Lord and Saviour of the World.

Yet there are several good lessons for us in this lack of full understanding that the disciples had, even though they were so close to their master, Jesus.

First, it is always wise to admit our ignorance. We must not be too pretentious as Christians. We know God through Jesus Christ. This knowledge is true, but very incomplete.

What we know through the Word of God is true, and we must learn all we can, but it is at the same time very limited. Who can know God! As soon as we think we can define him, we frame him in our systems - but God will never allow himself to be confined.

It is also important to realise that our knowledge of God and Jesus Christ is experiential in the first place. With our mind, with theology, we can create a good framework for how to think of our Lord - but true knowledge in the Christian sense is knowledge that is actually achieved in relationship.

Let me remind you that in the good old King James Version we read that Adam knew Eve, and children were born. In biblical language, knowing means relating in an intimate way. That is how we 'know God'.

And this is where the disciples had a great advantage over the crowds and over the theologians of those days. They lived, ate, moved with Jesus. That did not guarantee they understood it all, but so what! They were with him, and that is what really counts in the Christian faith.

In Judaism, people who wanted to know God needed to have a teacher. Jesus was the best one. The Master. And those who followed him closely were his students, his disciples. We call ourselves Christians, which means, we belong to Christ. We are with him.

Let the crowds have their opinions, let the theologians have their views - and I do not want to suggest that the rights views are not important - I have a PhD in theology so surely I find that important.

But what counts with God, is whether we learn from Jesus himself. Whether we are close to him, and listen to him.

The disciples went through many rough times. They were laughed at, rejected, later also persecuted and even killed. In such circumstances the right opinions and theology may surely help a bit, but what really helps, is the right company. Being close to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

And that is what our whole Lent period is about. As we follow our Lord, we go through the joy of Palm Sunday, and we go through the sorrow and the agony of his crucifixion, carrying our own cross. But in the company and presence of our Lord, we can always experience deep within, the comfort and joy that he gives.

We are with him in reading his word and meditating on it; we are with him in prayers; we are with him in holy Eucharist; we are with him in meeting one another; we are with him when we see him in the face of the people we love and serve.

If that is where we are, with our Lord, we are in the best of places. If that is where you are, you can manage the disasters of your daily life. Because to know him, is so much better than to simply know about him. To know Jesus is to know God. To know him, is true life. And if you know Jesus in such a way, peace and joy will be the result, even in the midst of darkness.

Amen