

## *Knowing God'*

Sunday 7 June 2009 – Rev Lance Thomas

John 14:

Sandra and I went to watch a Wednesday night chick flick recently. You know, the light weight romance comedy type stuff and we saw that Woody Allen was one of the actors. We nearly didn't watch it, not being Woody Allen fans. But we did, and he was brilliant, very funny in an understated way. We began to think that Woody Allen might be as good as some people say he is.

So when I came across a Woody Allen quote in some reading I was doing, I took note of it. It's from a movie called 'Love and Death' and Allen's character says, 'If God would only speak to me – just once. If he would only cough. If I could just see a miracle. If I could see a burning bush or the seas part or my uncle Sash pick up the check.'

What a wonderful quote. I think here Allen's character captures something of the dilemma of our smart modern world.

Within most people there is something of a longing to know God. It's real, it's there, but it is not a very cool thing to acknowledge even to oneself, so we are cleverly cynical, mocking the existence of the very God we kind of want to know.

Allen wants God on his terms. A God who will chat with him, ignoring 1400 years of God speaking to humankind, through the scriptures, just a word for me, or even a cough. For Allen a cough from God is more impressive than a covenant with Abraham or a Calvary for Christ.

Allen wants a miracle worker, his own personal parting of the seas, burning bush or at least to see his tight fisted uncle open his wallet. Although he doesn't say it, Allen also probably wants God as my friend, my therapist, my security, my insurance policy against unpleasant things happening to me or mine. Underlying the quote is the reality that God doesn't seem to want to play by Allen's rules. So he doesn't get his cough, or his burning bush and no doubt his uncle keeps his wallet firmly in his pocket.

Others have been less flippant as they seek to describe the unbeliever's dilemma. I think it was Augustine who said 'there is a deep dissatisfaction in life without God'. There is always something missing and the feeling sometimes is that it may be the most important thing that is missing. I have a non-believing friend who retired to Mount Maunganui. He had done what the world said one should do; raised his family, actually has a famous son, made a reasonable amount of money and retired to the Florida of New Zealand. After he had been there about 12 months, I asked how it was going. He said he was bored stiff. He spent most of his time playing golf with guys like himself as they competed with each other to tell stories of how much money they had made. There is a deep satisfaction in life without God. We are beings who at the same time long for God and yet are runaways from him. We have a desire for relationship with God and at the same time a hostility towards God.

We want to know God, but only up to a point, we don't want our knowledge of God to control our lives.

I remember falling very much into the group who sort of wanted to know God, but on my terms. There is an arrogance among many of us that believes we can rationally determine the existence of God or not. We are that smart. I wanted a God on my terms. A God that is discoverable by me. My understanding of God. What I think I even knew at the time, is that we are not actually as smart as we think we are and when you think about it a God whose existence could be proved or disproved by my amazing intellect would be a pretty small God. But of course that's what a lot of people do, so they end up with a God who looks very much like them, or at least a God who is very much the sort of God they would like. And they end up with nonsense like statements such as, what's true for you is true and what's true for me is true.

Mostly God refuses to play our games. To cough on command or produce a miracle as required to prove his existence. In fact God doesn't seem very interested in the discussion about the existence of God.

God in his grace will meet us in our inquiry – but only as the debate moves to how can we know God? Again I think it was Augustine who said, 'I believe in order to understand.' So often our approach is, I need to understand so I can believe. The starting place is when I recognise that I can't understand. That actually God is bigger than me. That my own enquiry will product nothing. When in humility I recognise that all I can know about God is what God makes known of himself.

As a church we have focused on going deeper into God. This is not a journey of enquiry – us in our efforts discovering more and more of God. It's a relationship. We go deeper into God, as God invites us deeper. We know more of God as God makes himself known. Our approach to this relationship needs to be an approach of humility worship and love.

In that attitude we see God by his light not ours. We begin to see God as he is in his goodness and purity and righteousness, and see ourselves, as sinful and in need of him.

Let me state it again. All we can know about God is what God chooses to reveal of himself. So we are always responding to God's revelation of himself rather than discovering God, finding God for ourselves.

Jeremiah; has the Lord saying;

Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom, or the strong man of his strength, or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness justice and righteousness on earth for in these I delight declares the Lord.

All we can know about God is what God chooses to reveal about himself.

Fortunately we have a God who seeks to make himself known.

When I first became a believer it was in reading Pauls letter to the Church in Rome that my arrogance was challenged, when Paul says,

"What may be known about God is plain...because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his external power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been mad. So men are without excuse.

Some people say God's signature is on creation. Others talk about the shadows of God. Peter Irvine was describing to me how on Wednesday morning he, coming from Okareka came over the hill at the top of Tarawera Road. The frost was still thick and white and crisp. There wasn't a cloud in a cloud in the sky or a breath of wind, pockets of steam, drifting up from the usual places, the lake like glass, and the sun just bouncing off it. Breath taking.

Creations, singing the qualities of the creator, beautiful, gentle, powerful, awesome, detailed, enormous, and varied, but also planned and precise and purposeful.

The creation speaks of the nature of God, but of itself it is never enough to arrive at a proper, knowledge of God. It's a starting point, but a long way short of all that God seeks to reveal of himself.

Some years ago Sandra and I went to the Grand Canyon in the United States.

That is some chasm. Certainly the part we were at there was no way it could ever be bridged. The distance between us and God is often depicted as a chasm, and our efforts to bridge the gap, futile. The gulf between ourselves and God can only be bridged from God's side.

The message of scripture is that God has crossed the Gulf not vaguely but very specifically. The gulf has been bridged by the word of God. God speaks to those who have the humility to listen.

When we talk about the word of God this can easily be reduced to being understood as the Bible. And Christians can sometimes be accused of worshiping the Bible rather than the God

of the Bible. By the word I mean the complete word of God as it comes to us in scriptures, God speaking into 1400 years of history, but more than that God speaking to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Christianity is Christ centred not book centred. The riches of God's word to humanity expressed in the stories of Abraham and Moses, the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah, the wisdom of Ecclesiastes and Proverbs and Job only reveal God fully in the light of Christ. Jesus whose foundational message is "I am", "I am the way the truth and the life".

There are some people who reflect the nature of God. The mother Teresa's of this world. In fact some times all of us can reflect something of the nature of God, in whose image we are made.

But Jesus is not just a great person, whose life demonstrates some of the nature of God, Even more so than any other human being. One way to grasp this is to turn it around. When we fully look at God we will see Jesus.

The New Testament does not say Jesus is like God, it says 'God is like Jesus; it says that to see Jesus is to see God, to come to Jesus is to come to God, to be judged by Jesus will be to be judged by God. In a word there will be nothing in God, no attribute or quality, no decision or purpose, that is not in Jesus Christ the son of God. As Colossians 2:9 says, 'the one in whom all the fullness of the deity lives in bodily form'. If we know we are right with the Son we need not fear to stand before the Father.

So God, who chooses to be known, does so through creation, through his word, the scriptures and the person of Christ. As the infomercials say on television – wait there is more!

There is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Again we do not have to fall back on our limited intellectual capabilities to know the God who speaks to us through Christ and the scriptures. It is the Holy Spirit that bears testimony to the truth. It is the Holy Spirit that seals this knowledge in our hearts. It is the Holy Spirit that quickens our interest, confirms our understanding, that leaves us in no doubt, that in this we know God.

When I was at university we did a course on religious language. One of the frustrations for those who studied philosophy of language, was that there are no words, no arguments, no logic that would convince the one who knew God in the power of the Holy Spirit, nothing that could change the absolute certainty of what they now knew. Or rather, who they now knew. God is a speaking God. He speaks to us in a limited way through creation. More specifically he speaks through his Word, the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and the person of Jesus Christ.

In the power of the Holy Spirit the Word gives life and a relationship with God is ours, to be enjoyed forever.

Our God is a speaking God; but a speaking God calls for a listening people. The human desire to know God in a non relational way, is doomed to failure. No coughs, no miracles on demand, no discoveries of human inquiry. The only way we can know God is to come in humility, worship and love and to listen as he chooses to speak.