

## John 14:1-31

### “Lord, how can we know?”

Epistemology. It doesn't sound like a promising subject for a sermon – or at least not a sermon you want to stay awake in. In fact, unless you are a student or graduate in English or philosophy you may well not even know what the word epistemology means.

But, whether you've heard of it or not epistemology is vitally important to you. Epistemology is that part of philosophy concerned with knowledge. It is about questions such as “what do we know?” and, especially, “how can we know?” And in relation to spiritual things in particular that is a very pressing question indeed.

We live, you and I, in an age where there is more information about ultimate realities, human origins and world religions – indeed more information about everything – than ever before.

But also in an age where we are permanently uncertain about knowledge.

- Political scandals mean we don't trust the representative we elect.
- Drug trial scandals mean we don't trust the companies whose products help keep us alive.
- Reporting scandals mean we don't trust the people who give us our news.
- Postmodern literary theory means we don't trust the words we read in books.
- We certainly don't trust anything we're told by representatives of organised religion.
- The prevalence of unfaithfulness means we often don't even trust the words of our wife or husband.

But the trouble is, of course, that we need to know stuff. Day by day we can't do anything without information we think we can rely upon. But it's such hard work to come by.

20 years ago it was hard work to get information about something you didn't know about – you had to go the local library, find the Encyclopaedia Britannica, select the right volume, look up the bits you wanted. Pay 10p a sheet to photocopy it...

Now you just type whatever it is you want into Google and find 4 million hits. And then spend the next 3 hours working out if you can trust what any of these anonymous web sites are actually telling you.

And eventually that state of permanent uncertainty about knowledge has a corrosive effect on us. It makes us cynics. It makes us mistrustful. It makes us tired of

looking for truth, especially in areas where we think it might be difficult.

- How can we know?
- How can we know who we really are?
- How can we know if God is really there?
- How can we know if he loves us?
- How can we know if he is just?
- How can we know if there is life after death?

It just all feels like a lot of hard work doesn't it?

And in the face of such seemingly impenetrable questions we tend to retreat, depending on our personality and circumstances, into one of two modes.

Some, what you might call religious types, adopt a position of absolute certainty – you might call it blind faith. Some of these proponents of blind faith are obviously religious – like the terrifying certainty of the violent Islamist or the irritating “you've just got to believe” Christian. Others, like Christopher Hitchens or Daniel Dennett, are blind faith followers of atheism adopting an equal certainty that there is no God.

Most of us, I think, are not like that. Instead we just live with the doubts.

We're often not really convinced that we can know, that we can be certain. But we plod on regardless. Some do so describing themselves as Agnostic and giving a label to their uncertainty. Some come to church, even join the church, and sign up to a statement of faith – but constant uncertainties follow them round.

But most, I think, just decide that it's all too much trouble to be worth thinking about. After all, if you can't be sure, what point is there in pondering it too deeply? There are plenty of other busy things to be getting on with in life. And at least not making a decision about divine realities means you can live your life pretty much how you want – even if you're not quite sure what the point of it is!

But, if we're honest, not knowing is actually really difficult isn't it? Not being certain about our relationship to the most fundamental realities of the universe – the God who made it and us – is extremely unsettling.

Thinking that you might have found a spiritual answer to your most profound and basic needs as a human

being but then not being sure, uncertain if you can trust this answer or not, is a very painful place to be.

Well if that's where you are this morning then take heart. Because not only was that precisely the situation the disciples of Jesus faced as recorded by Jesus' close friend John in the passage we've just had read to us. But, more than that, in the passage we hear from the lips of Jesus himself how it is that we can know the most important things we need to in the universe...

In this section of John's account of the last hours of the life of Jesus we learn that we can know God. And we learn that that is a cause for great celebration and happiness.

Firstly, then we can know God and rejoice because...

### **1 Jesus has gone (v1-7)**

Immediately before these verses Jesus has just predicted that Peter, perhaps the most fiercely loyal of the disciples, and certainly one of the most prominent, will, with a few short hours, deny that he has ever known Jesus. Jesus himself will be betrayed and go somewhere that the disciples cannot follow him.

Just imagine, for a minute, what a devastating thing that must have been to hear.

These men had spent three years with Jesus. They had shared fields and barns, boats and rooms with him. They had eaten and drunk and laughed and cried with him.

And, during that time, they began to realise that they were not living with a rabbi or even a prophet, but with God's anointed king himself. One who was, in himself, divine.

However much they may not have understood, and, as we'll see that was plenty, it must have been the most amazing experience to spend time with Jesus once you had even some idea who he was.

We're so used to the idea that Jesus dies that it's perhaps difficult for us to understand just what a bombshell it must have been to the disciples to discover that.

Not only was the man who was, humanly speaking, the leader of their little band going – that would have been bad enough.

More than that the disciples knew enough to know that it was in Jesus that all the answers to their most

important questions about life were going to be found. And he was going to leave them.

It's no wonder that Jesus has to tell them the words of V1: *Do not let your hearts be troubled*. Contrary to all that your experience tells you at this moment, Jesus says, do not worry. Have no fear.

Why not? Why not fear when all that is about to happen suggests the absence of God and his love in their world? Indeed why should we not fear when the daily news of wars and terror, disease and sickness, disaster and death seems to speak of the absence of God, or at least the absence of a loving God, in our world?

Well, Jesus says, we ought not to fear because the purpose of his going is to restore us to that right relationship with God where we know him with all certainty.

These are, perhaps, some of the most famous verses of the Bible. They have frequently been used to speak of the physical reality of what it will be like to be with God forever in his kingdom – and they certainly do speak of that. But they tell us much more than that as well.

Firstly, note, the place for which those who trust Jesus are destined is God's house. It's not a hotel. It's not a convention centre. It's a family home. It is the dwelling of God himself. Because eternal life is not just living forever. It's living forever with God in relationship with him.

Secondly, there are many rooms in God's house. This is not a place for just Peter, or just the 12, or just the first few hundred disciples. It is a house of abundant rooms – enough for all.

Thirdly, although the house already exists and there are many rooms in the house it is not, in some way, prepared yet. How can that be? What preparation is Jesus talking about? Does he need to instruct the angels to turn down the corners of the sheets and put towels on the beds?

Actually I think the clue is in v2 itself. How does Jesus prepare a place for people in the family and household of God himself? By going there.

He is the way to get this perfect place. And he opens the way by going himself.

But that's not the end of his plan. Not at all. In v3 Jesus tells us that the final goal is not for him to be with the Father but to return and take all of the disciples, and all

of the people who will fill those many rooms, to join him.

Thomas' response is quite surprising. You'd think that he would know where Jesus is going – because Jesus has just told them he's going to his Father's house. But he obviously hasn't grasped what that means. And it seems he's still thinking very much in terms of needing a map or a route – perhaps to a physical destination. Perhaps some sort of moral routemap to ensure blessing?

But Jesus is quite clear. The way to knowledge. The way to be in relationship with God himself. The way to be part of his kingdom, his family, is bound up with Jesus himself.

He is the way – and the truth and the life. Of course these things are completely dependent on one another. Jesus is the way to know God because he is the truth and the life.

Humanity is ignorant and in darkness – we can have no way to God without the truth that Jesus brings. Humanity is wicked and in death – we can have no way to God without the life that Jesus brings.

That is why there is no way to God without Jesus – because there is no truth about God without Jesus and no possibility of God's life without Jesus.

Jesus here picks up a theme that runs throughout his teaching – that of exclusivity. No-one, he told the learned Nicodemus, can see God's kingdom unless he is born again. No-one, he told the crowds, can come to God unless God draws him. And no-one can come to the Father except through Jesus.

It is because of Jesus going – his going to the cross, his going to his death – it is because of Jesus going that there is a way at all.

In our consumer orientated society we can often seem disappointed that there is only one way to the knowledge and presence of God. Only one way? Just one? I want a choice. I want to exercise my rights. I demand an alternative.

But that is totally the wrong way to think about this. For the alternative to one way is not many ways but no way.

The alternative to a revelation from God himself about how to know God is not lots of different methods to know God – it is the silence of an inexplicable and hostile universe.

If God does not speak with one voice and provide one saviour then he does not speak clearly at all.

For the disciples the fact that Jesus was going was a sign that God was abandoning them.

But Jesus says it is exactly the opposite. The fact that he is going – for us the fact that he has gone to the cross – is the sign of God's commitment and love to his people.

The experience of the disciples was that God was absent. That would become even more profound as they watched the events of the next days unfold, saw the terrible agonies of the crucifixion of an innocent man, lost their bottle and fled into hiding.

But if that is what they thought they were misinterpreting their experience. Experience declared that God was absent from the cross of Jesus on Calvary. But that verdict of experience would be totally reversed on Easter day as Jesus rose from the dead.

In the midst of uncertainty look to the cross, predicted by Jesus and used by him as the means by which he would open the way for us to know and be with God.

Secondly we can know God and rejoice because...

## **2 Jesus has left testimony (v8-14)**

It's possible that there is a more outrageous request somewhere in the Bible that Philip's question in John 14:8. But I haven't found it yet!

Every well brought up Jew knew, from the earliest days they could think and converse, that no-one could see God and live. They knew that the greatest of the great in their national history had had no more than glimpses of glimpses of God.

Moses saw the trailing edge of the glory of God's back. Isaiah saw the hem of his robe. Ezekiel saw the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.

And Philip says "show us the Father and that will be enough for us."

Like millions before and since he rightly thinks that the visible presence of God ought to be sufficient to be certain in his knowledge of God.

And he clearly thinks very highly of Jesus. He imagines that Jesus can arrange what nobody else in history could arrange – a vision of God himself in all his glory. But he massively underestimates just how significant

Jesus is! Having asked for the greatest revelation possible in the universe – to see God – what response does Philip get?

“Don’t you know me?” To have met Jesus, is to have seen God. Which might be great for Philip – but surely is rather depressing for us because we haven’t seen Jesus. And if we’ve not seen Jesus how can we know God?

Well actually it turns out not to be depressing at all. Because the very thing that we still possess about Jesus – his words – turns out to be the thing that brings us the knowledge of God. The words I say to you are not my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.

Even the amazing miracles of Jesus, which we do not see but have recorded for us, are secondary in importance to his words, v11. We can know God and rejoice because Jesus has spoken about the reality of who he is.

If you’re new to churches, or perhaps just new to Christ Church, you might be wondering why we put such an emphasis on the Bible bits in our church life. Our morning meeting is about half Bible reading and talk. Our evening meeting is more like three-quarters Bible study. So are our housegroups. We teach the Bible to the tots and the children. We have bible’s by the door and Bibles on the bookstall and Bible, Bible everywhere.

Not all churches do that. Why do we do it? Why are we so obsessive about this?

Well it’s really very simple. It’s because it is in the words that God speaks to us, throughout the whole of the Old Testament and especially in the words of Jesus, his Son and those who followed and were taught by him, that we can know God.

God reveals himself to us in the person of Jesus as he speaks – believe me what I **say** that I am in the Father.

Having God’s words is a great cause for rejoicing. Because he has left us testimony. And, finally, we can know God and rejoice because...

### **3 Jesus has given us the Spirit (v15-31)**

Any John Grisham fans in the audience will know that the difference between British and American lawyers is more than simply the difference between wearing wigs and wearing Armani suits.

Whereas we have solicitors and barristers the Americans have an undivided profession - they are all "attorneys". And often when they are publicly addressed they are referred to as "Counsellor". It is in that sense that Jesus uses the word Counsellor here is v16.

This is not a marriage counsellor or a "non-directive" counsellor. It’s much more of a legal counsellor, as John puts it elsewhere "one who speaks in our defence", this counsellor is our representative before God.

And this is not, please notice, a characteristic that makes the Holy Spirit unique. In fact exactly the opposite. This is "another counsellor", Jesus quite clearly implying that he himself is the first counsellor.

The first thing we need to know about the Holy Spirit in the Christian age is that he comes, in some sense, to replace Jesus. When Jesus is no longer here the Spirit acts as our counsellor, our advocate.

The Spirit is, v17 there, "the Spirit of truth". Now that is not simply because the Holy Spirit doesn't lie. It’s more than that. He is the Spirit of truth because in his very being he communicates truth.

Jesus has just described himself as "the way, the truth and the life". Jesus is the truth, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth. Jesus is the counsellor. The Holy Spirit is another counsellor.

I quite often meet people who suggest that it would be much easier to know God with certainty if Jesus was still here. That somehow it is harder to know the truth about God with conviction now in the days after Jesus’ death and resurrection.

But that is simply not true. Because the Spirit is not different to Jesus. In fact in his character, his holiness, his grace and his love he is the same, for God can never be less than perfect.

The Spirit of truth is like Jesus.

And how this similarity works itself out in people’s responses to the Holy Spirit.

Generally, when you see the word "world" in John's gospel it signifies humanity in rebellion to God. Unbelieving, sceptical, godless and arrogant.

The opening verses of John's gospel say that although the world was made through him, that is Jesus, the world did not recognise him. It rejected him and hung its creator on a cross to die.

And after they have killed him and God has raised him back to life and sent his Holy Spirit what is the reaction of the world? **The world cannot accept the Spirit either.** They cannot see him and they do not know him. And what was true then is true today. The world does not believe in the Holy Spirit. Partly people are suspicious of what they cannot see, but more fundamentally they cannot believe in one whom they do not know.

But the disciples do know him. Look at v17 there. In fact they may know him better than they think they do. This teaching may seem all very strange to them. But the reality is that the Holy Spirit lives with them already. And soon, after Jesus death and resurrection, he will come and live in them.

And that is a promise that Jesus specifically expands to all Christians in all generations. In 17:23 he talks about how he himself will be in all Christians.

Which means that if you are a Christian here this morning you know the Holy Spirit. More than that he lives in you.

And, v18, this is not merely some head knowledge to be believed – but also an experience to be lived. In this verse Jesus promises that he will not leave the disciples as orphans. There is an objective reality there – they will have a heavenly Father because of what Jesus is about to do on the cross. But there is also a sense that there will be a relief from feelings of abandonment. From wondering if they are all alone in the universe. From suspecting that God is absent. Because he will be with them and in them. And that is an experience for our day as well.

But what if you're here this morning and you're not a Christian? Perhaps you're thinking this sounds a bit unreasonable. After all surely the people who need most proof of the reality of God, most knowledge of his care and love are those who don't believe?

Perhaps you feel that God should convince you of his reality before you make any commitment.

But if that's where you're at this morning – and I've been there myself – I want to say to you that you are completely misunderstanding what kind of knowledge the knowledge of God is.

Because Jesus is emphasising here that knowing God is a personal knowledge. A knowledge that cannot be separated from relationship, from love.

That is why Jesus answers Judas' question the way he does. It's a great question Judas asks isn't it?

When he is resurrected from the dead why doesn't Jesus simply appear in glory and power to the whole world? That was what any Jew would have expected of their triumphant Messiah, their victorious king.

But Jesus says he is interested in revealing himself to those who are in a relationship with him. Those who love me, as opposed to those who do not love me.

And just like with any other relationship discovery of the character and concern of the other person for you is only possible as you also commit to them.

The knowledge of God through the Spirit Jesus sends is available to anyone. It is a knowledge that brings confidence. A knowledge, v27, that brings peace. A knowledge that, as followers of Jesus embrace it gives something totally different from anything else in this life and drives away fear.

But it's also a knowledge that is dependent on our commitment to Jesus. He asks us, v1, to trust him.

Not to trust him blindly. Not to trust him without reason. But on the basis of his work of love on the cross to open a way for us to know God...

On the basis of his words recorded for us reliably in the Bible that reveal the character of God...

On the basis of his works of power – the signs that point to the reality that Jesus is God himself.

All those things, made plain and public and visible, are the things Jesus asks us to look at as the basis for trusting him and entering a relationship with him. He asks us, because of those things, to take his words seriously, listen to what he says about our need for his rescue, talk to him and accept his love and grace.

We might not trust our politicians, our drug companies, our journalists, our authors or our bishops. And, indeed, the Bible gives us good reasons to be wary of the reliability of any human being – because we are all notoriously fickle.

But we can trust Jesus. And through him, for he is the way, we can know God and rejoice.

*Andrew Evans  
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