

**Sermon given by Dr Sandra Fach –Chaplain of Buxton Campus of Derby  
University on 18 January 2009 for Christian Unity & Education.  
Epiphany 2  
Buxton Methodist Church**

I Samuel 3.1-10  
Psalm 139.1-6, 13-18  
I Corinthians 6.12-20  
John 1.43-51

*May the words of my mouth, and the mediation of our hearts together, be acceptable  
in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

I don't know if you woke up in a celebratory mood, but we are celebrating quite a bit today. This Sunday marks the beginning of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. It also happens to be the second Sunday after Epiphany. *And* today we are celebrating Education Sunday. Christian Unity celebrates oneness. Epiphany celebrates revelation. And Education Sunday celebrates, among other things, knowledge. Remarkably, or perhaps not, our passages provide a way for us to hold these things together.

As we well know, it is not really the question of biblical authority that is a barrier to Christian unity. It is, among other things, our varying interpretations of the sacred book that is our stumbling block. Part of what it means to be human is that we inevitably bring our own experience to the text. I am no exception – if I am honest, reading through today's lectionary passages proved no exception. As I read about voices calling out in the night, I couldn't help but think of the little voice that calls out to us every night. In our case, it is not the voice of God, but the voice of Leon, our three-year old son. I must admit that upon reading I Samuel, the first thoughts that ran through my head weren't pious ones about answering the call of God, but rather about whether or not we'll ever get a full night's sleep again!

If, for us, Christian unity means thinking the same way or holding the same beliefs, we are probably hoping in vain. But it is fitting that the week of prayer for Christian unity falls within the season of Epiphany, for therein lies the key, I believe, to our hope. Regardless of their respective emphases, both the Eastern and Western Church

in essence celebrate the same thing in Epiphany – God’s revelation of himself. Specifically, we celebrate the manifestation of Christ to the world and the mystery of the Incarnation. Epiphany is about a person. This must be our focus in our approach to Christian unity.

‘Come follow me’. In the Guide to Prayer that I use for devotions, ‘Come follow me’ was the theme for this week. As followers of Christ, we hold many beliefs. We learn them – some actively and many passively. In celebrating Education Sunday we recognise that, in many cases, we are *educated* to know them – we read the Bible, we listen to sermons, we recite creeds, we sing songs etc. These all feed the soul, but they also feed us information, a ‘Christian knowledge base’ if you will. And for some, this education process starts very early. I am amazed at the ‘religious’ things our young son tells us. He’s picked them up from Sunday school, from nursery, from extended family, and hopefully from us! At his tender age, he knows what to do and what to expect when we go to the front of the church for communion. He knows his fish is with God, and somehow knows that as a good thing. He talks about how God made everything and how Jesus is alive. Even our one year old girl, Anna, who is just learning to talk, exclaimed ‘Baby Jesus!’ whenever she saw a picture of a baby over the Christmas season.

A significant aspect of being a Christian is education. On Education Sunday, catechism is something to be celebrated. It is, in my opinion, a *good* thing and some do it better than others (or simply do it!). But we would be mistaken if we were to think that Christianity is primarily about being educated in doctrine, about learning certain beliefs and practises. These are important, but Jesus said ‘come follow *me*.’ First and foremost we are called to a *person*. Our final hymn today says it this way: ‘Thou and Thou only, first in my heart’. This is *personal* knowledge, that is, the kind of knowledge that is only possible in the context of relationship.

What does Epiphany have to say about this? Well, Epiphany is about revelation and the truth is that *we cannot hope to know anything about God unless he reveals himself to us*. That isn’t a terribly contentious claim. Think, for a moment, about your relationship with a good friend or a spouse. A relationship doesn’t exist, we don’t really get to *know* someone intimately unless that person opens themselves up to be

known. That is, we know as we are allowed to know. And we, in turn, are known only as we reveal ourselves to another, as painful and risky as that may be.

This kind of personal knowledge doesn't come to us directly. It is mediated knowledge. What does that mean? Well, we all have bodies. In fact, being embodied is part of what it means to be human. And the knowledge we have of each other is, in part, mediated by our bodies and the use of our senses. As I was writing this part of my sermon, my children were busying themselves 'making soup' – that is to say they were stirring corn kernels in their respective bowls – touching, feeling, seeing – using their bodies as they were exploring and learning. On Friday night, we were out for a curry celebrating my brother-in-law's birthday and somewhere in the conversation someone mentioned the actor Michael J. Fox – the star of the American sitcom, 'Family Ties', the 'Back to the Future' films and the more recent series 'Spin City'. He suffers from Parkinson's disease, and in our conversation someone mentioned that apparently, for him, one of the most frustrating things about the disease is that he is no longer able to display facial expressions. That, of course, does not mean he can't relate to others. But it does emphasise the point about the mediating role our bodies normally play in relating to one another.

This relates to today's passage from Corinthians. What we do with our bodies makes a difference. Personal knowledge is holistic. We are called to love God with our whole selves – with our heart, soul, mind *and* our body. Being united to Christ involves our bodies as well. So any question of Christian unity should take into account what we do with them.

To sum up so far, then. First and foremost we are called to follow a *person*. And just as we cannot know any person unless he or she opens him or herself up to be known, we cannot know God unless he reveals himself to us.

Because God is a person, our relationship with him is not unlike our relationship with other people. But, of course, God is different. Listen again to the words from I Samuel:

‘Samuel!’ Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, ‘Here I am, for you called me.’ But he said, ‘I did not call, my son; lie down again.’ *Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.* (italics mine)

And from John’s Gospel:

When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, ‘Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!’ Nathanael asked him, ‘*Where did you come to know me?*’ Jesus answered, ‘I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.’

Implicit in these passages is the fact that although Samuel and Nathanael do not know the Lord, the Lord knows them. He calls Samuel by name. He pronounces on Nathanael’s character. If I want to know you, I depend on you revealing yourself to me. But God already knows you. He already knows me. In today’s psalm, the psalmist seems to imply that God’s knowledge of us is quite independent of our revelation of ourselves to him. Following God is as much about *being* known as it is about knowing:

O lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. (Psalm 139.1-6)

Does that cause you to fear? Being known so well; not being able to hide or keep any secrets?

There are two things that should help cast away our fear. Again, they are implicit in our passages. Listen again: ‘The Lord **called**, “Samuel! Samuel!”’ ‘[Jesus] **found** Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me’. These are *invitations* to a relationship. It is the Lord who searches and calls out. It all starts with God. *He* makes the **first move**. And if he should do this, *already knowing who we are*...well, that should make us relieved, not fearful.

In our relationships with others, we are very good at holding things back, putting our best foot forward lest we scare them away (‘if they knew who I really was’). And that is natural and not a bad thing – it is self-preservation! Revealing all is safe in the context of unconditional love, but too risky and potentially hurtful when we don’t know someone. Perhaps that is an underlying reason for the condemnation of

fornication for it divorces our body from the rest of us. Giving ourselves intimately in one aspect of our being but not in another is, well, dehumanising. It is a dualistic, as opposed to a holistic, practise.

So first, knowing us, God still invites us into relationship with him. The second thing that should cast out any fear is the particular message of Epiphany. Epiphany is about the revelation of God, but it is more specific, because it celebrates the revelation of God *in Christ*. Perhaps we could say it this way. When God opened himself up to be known most intimately, it was the babe in Bethlehem we saw. Epiphany is about seeing the face of God *in Christ*. If we want to know who God is, we must look at *this* man and we mustn't try to tie him to any preconceived ideas we have of God.

In the face of Christ we see a gracious God, a God of mercy. First and foremost, we are called to a *person*. *This* person is our God, revealed to us in the merciful and gracious face of Christ. He knows us and he still loves us and he invites us into a most intimate relationship. So intimate that Paul uses – perhaps to our discomfort – the analogy of sexual intimacy to describe it. Just as sexual relations make two into one flesh, ‘anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.’ ‘Heart of my own heart’ as we will sing in our final hymn.

So, to conclude. If our desire is to be Christ-like, therein lies our hope. If we want to be one with other Christians, therein lies our hope. We need to stop looking at each other and turn our focus back to Christ. In union with him, we, too, can be loving and gracious. We, too, may look to others – including other Christians – and say, even knowing what I know, I extend the hand of grace.

*In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

### **Blessing**

We are known and loved.

It is enough and more.

In the name of that eternal love,

Go forth in peace to love and serve the Lord and one another.

And may the blessing of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be with you now and evermore.

Amen.