

## Knowing God

Sixth Sunday of Easter, 10<sup>th</sup> May 2026

*St Leonard's Denmark, Alison Kershaw*

*Acts 17.22-31, John 14.15-21*

*Through the written word and the spoken word may we know your Living Word, Jesus Christ our Saviour, Amen*

This time, three years ago, Graham and I were staying in a small stone cottage in the Yorkshire Dales, - a quiet place to rest inbetween walks and visiting my cousin who was very unwell and being cared for in a hospice. It was a time of heightened feeling, and I was heartened to find that an original 17<sup>th</sup> century Quaker Meeting House was still being used in the nearby village of Airton. It was built in the early 1600s for a dissenting group called the Seekers before becoming home to the Quakers. So, one Sunday I went along and sat in the golden silence of a spring afternoon, in company with around 12 other people – who I later learnt over tea and hugs to be a mix of Quakers and Anglicans. The silence was occasionally gently broken when someone felt moved to share an insight or concern. There was a small table in the centre with a Bible and a book called *Advices & Queries*, which someone picked up and selected this short reflection to read:

*Take time to learn about other people's experiences of the Light. Remember the importance of the Bible, the writings of Friends and all writings which reveal the ways of God. As you learn from others, can you in turn give freely from what you have gained? While respecting the experiences and opinions of others, do not be afraid to say what you have found and what you value. Appreciate that doubt and questioning can also lead to spiritual growth and to a greater awareness of the Light that is in us all. — Britain Yearly Meeting Advices #5*

I reflected on these words at a deeply personal level and called to mind the light of various people in my life, somehow mingling their light with my own inward light and feeling close to them. On a more public, but still inter-personal level, you can see why the Quakers are known for their ecumenical spirit and openness to inter-faith dialogue.

This came to mind as I thought about Paul's search for common ground with the Athenians – Athens was a multi-cultural place of Jewish devotion and scholarship, packed with shrines to gods and goddesses (that reportedly outnumbered people), and was an epicentre of art, intellectual enquiry, philosophy, and poetry. Now, Paul was no Quaker – he is described in Acts as arguing in synagogues and the marketplace, and being called a “babbler.” He and his followers are also accused of “turning the world upside down.” (Acts 17. 16-20, 6) But alongside this, we also see that he engaged with a variety of people. He debated with Epicurean philosophers who considered happiness as the primary aim of life – through pleasure in moderation and avoidance of pain. He also debated Stoic philosophers who taught freedom from suffering through self-control and fortitude, objectivity and inner calm, and some Stoics held to a supreme deity who permeated and ordered the universe. So various Athenians brought him to the Areopagus – a judiciary council that met on a rocky outcrop on the outskirts of Athens curious to learn more “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.” (17.19-20)

Though open, the atmosphere may have been edgy – as the Areopagite was a powerful body, who some 500 years before had executed Socrates for his new ideas (and whose trial has fascinating parallels to Paul's speech) But Paul was given a hearing and went on his way, after convincing a number of his listeners, including Dionysius - an Areopagite, and a woman called Damaris (17.33) Paul begins his address by noting all the objects of worship in the city and in particular an altar *To an unknown god*. This was possibly a type of insurance against not offending any god left out in all the other shrines, but Paul takes this as his springboard to speak of knowledge in a different sense. This God, he proclaims, is in fact known to you, though you may not realise it: *The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, [and] gives to all mortals life and breath and all things ...* He notes that from time immemorial there has been an instinct in all generations and places to search for this God

*and perhaps grope for him and find him – though indeed he is not far from each of us.* Then quoting the 7<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC philosopher-poets Epimenides and Aratus: *For in him we live and move and have our being; as even some of your own poets have said. ‘For we too are his offspring.’* So, a beloved phrase that has found its way into our prayer book is not quoting Paul, but Paul quoting an ancient Greek poet. The early church and the writers of the New Testament did not live in a vacuum they lived in a world swimming with philosophical and mystical thought.

So this truth has always been very near to us. In his letter to the Romans, Paul noted that though the Gentiles did not know the law of Moses, they “*do instinctively what the law requires ... They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts ...*” (Romans 2.14-15) So Paul tells the seekers of every age that God can never be unknown –that God is “not far from each of us” for we are sprung from this source – that we know God through the existence of the world itself and all that has life, that we know God by the instincts of our own heart, and that we can now know God through Jesus who was appointed to make God known to all people.

John’s gospel begins with a similar synthesis of Hebrew, Greek and Christian understandings. He writes of the Word – the Logos – the World Soul – that is the creative and harmonising principle of all life yet unknown to a conflict-riven world – but now made flesh, coming into the world as *the light of all people ... the true light, which enlightens everyone*, and giving us grace to become children of God. (John 11-18) And in today’s text from John we learn from this Word made Flesh another way to know God. Jesus himself shows us the way and asks us to follow him and live and love as he showed us. On the last night with his friends, after washing their feet and bidding them do the same for one another, Jesus gives a new commandment - the essence of all others: “*that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*” (John 13.34-35) Others will know we are disciples, because we know ourselves and others as children – as offspring - of God. Jesus later returns to the theme, saying “*If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you ... on that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you...*” And so begins a beautiful circular dance of belonging that means that we are not just being blindly obedient – we follow this commandment because we love Jesus who is in us, who is our inner light, and we cannot do otherwise than love one another by this grace. To know is to do. To know is to instinctively strive to live in the light of this command, but this is not always easy. So, the Spirit is sent for our strengthening, and to help us strengthen others. The many translations of Advocate (or Paraclete) give a sense of how we might love one another in the spirit – as counsellor, companion, friend, comforter, the one who comes alongside.<sup>i</sup> As Revd. Sue points out this week, this love is not only for those we naturally feel affection for, but is an ethical choice for justice and advocacy that extends to all realms of life and responsibility.

So let us sit in the quiet of our old church this crisp May morning and bring all this into the present moment. Let us know God in whom we live, move and have our being. Let us look inside. Let us welcome the Spirit of truth that abides in us, let us know ourselves as being in Christ, and Christ in us, as Christ is in this God we know, who is very near to us. Let us know ourselves and those alongside us as offspring of the light. Let us *take time to learn about other people’s experiences of the Light* and grow in *awareness of the Light that is in us all.* Amen

---

<sup>i</sup> Notes on Eater 6A May 10 2026, Pulpit Fiction Podcast <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/easter6a/#john14%3A15-21>