

## **Sermon on 1 Corinthians 2: 1ff Will I get to see God?**

With Lily and Esther and so many other children in church today, just imagine the following scene.

It is Sunday.

Grandma is helping her grandchild with the final preparations for church.

“Grandma?” – One of those unexpected childhood conversations begin...

“Will I get to see God at church?”

Grandma looks at the little girl, unsure how to respond.

“I don’t think so,” she says eventually. “God is up in heaven with Grandpa.”

The standard answer of many people, isn’t it? Neither considered nor thoughtful, don’t you agree? But how often do we all give an answer like that?!

The conversation between Grandma and granddaughter moves on: shoe laces need to be tied, the little red handbag must be found. And soon after, the pair arrives at church.

Now the question comes again: “Will we get to see God, Grandma?”

“Is this God?” and the girl points at the beautifully robed pastor with his embroidered stole. “Or this?” She turns round and sees the choir master – also in a robe.

Is it the beautiful people, or the beautiful clothes, or is it beauty itself that helps us see God?

What about the poorly dressed old man?

The woman in need?

The child in tears?

Do we see God in them?

There are so many ways to recognise God. So many different ways... for all of us. But all we have in common is a longing for God, a searching for the Holy, a wish to meet the living God.

We are all here because we have had encounters with this God... mother or father... friend of humankind... God as love itself, God in Jesus, God’s spirit of life and dignity, God’s power in creation, God comforting, God dreaming, God creating, God loving us, giving us hope, making us new, helping us to become whole; God knowing our pain, sharing our fear, and God awakening in us the expectation of the impossible being possible...

We find God, when we pray.

We find God in the people who brought us up in Christian faith and life, in the Bible stories we study, in the people who teach us these stories.

We find God in the friends and family whom we love and who love us... and in all the magic, mysterious, precious moments of life.

I hope that we all can find God in church, but I also trust that we recognise God’s presence in the workplace, in schools, in our homes, and in nature. God with his spirit is alive in our midst; we need only open our ears and eyes...

But sometimes talking about God is not all that easy. When we shared our images of God at a recent lay preachers' Faith & Worship meeting, we realised how enriching, but also how difficult it is, to talk about God. We filled a whole notice board on a wall upstairs with our ideas and pictures. We shared and discussed, and discovered that it was one thing to talk about our images of God, and yet another to share our experiences with God – especially the ones that are nearest and most precious to us.

Why is that so? We asked.

And at the same time I discovered this passage from Paul's letter to the Corinthians which you heard as a reading a few moments ago.

Paul acknowledges the difficulty of such intimate sharing as talking about our personal experiences with God. He confesses to the congregation in Corinth that talking about God makes him tremble. He shakes in his boots when he imagines describing his relationship with the Holy. Paul admits to us that he worries about what he'll say... whether he'll find the right words and images...

Paul was afraid he was somehow not good enough to speak of his personal relationship with his God.

We know from other passages in the Letters and in the Book of Acts that Paul did not know Jesus personally. Paul had not come to believe through the stories about Jesus or his teachings.

No. Paul's faith was based on one or more mystical experiences. The most important was surely his vision on the road to Damascus. Remember?

It turned Paul's whole life upside down.

Until then, Paul had been a Jewish Pharisee who had persecuted those who believed in Jesus. But then, on the road to Damascus he was, to use his own words, "seized by Jesus the Lord".

The world he had known came to a standstill.

Everything about Paul was reordered.

His beliefs shifted.

His job was redefined.

His life's purpose changed.

All the foundations of his life were shaken up, and all he could do was: hold onto this mysterious experience where the Christ crucified on the cross was revealed to him.

From Ephesus Paul writes this letter to the believers in Corinth.

He tells them that he comes to them knowing nothing except Christ and Christ's death on the cross.

It wasn't that Paul didn't know anything else. Paul was a very well educated man.

He had received both a Greek education and the training of a Jewish Pharisee.

He knew philosophy, literature, poetry and sciences.

He knew the Hebrew Bible from back to front.

He would have had much to say...

However – after this encounter with Jesus, all he knew became secondary.

The only thing that counted from then on, was his relationship to God through Christ.

The power of that event was so significant that Paul not only changed his own life, but felt the urge to share the experience and proclaim what he knew about Jesus. He had not only seen Jesus in this vision, but he had experienced Jesus' resurrection...

This was hard to understand for many people around him. This was far too radical for most of them. Without going into details and deeper explanations..., what Paul now had to say, caused conflict with many, offended some, and seemed silly to others.

It wasn't just the Jews who would reject a Christ crucified. To the Greeks it didn't make much sense either. Worshipping someone who was executed by crucifixion to them was ridiculous – if not insane.

And yet Paul's experience was beyond logic, reason or education.

Paul knew intensely and personally so much more than the studying of law and science or any other subject could ever provide you with. And he writes that the God he believes in cannot be understood by the spirit of the world, or the spirit of wisdom, or by any other intellectual efforts... It can only be understood by the spirit of God, a gift that is given to all who believe. "We have the mind of Christ", Paul finishes his passage with, and thus encourages others to follow Christ as well.

Try it, he seems to say, and see what it is like. It is worth it. Believe me.

Paul didn't need anyone else to tell him what to believe. He didn't need anyone to believe the same thing he believed in order to tell his story... Neither common sense nor a majority of hostile non-believers could have stopped him from sharing his faith. He simply had to do it; and that was a big challenge to him and those who lived and worked with him.

Proclaiming what we know about God can be a challenge for us, too. Each of us has had experiences of God – even though it may be hard to recognize them as such – and then to share them...

Just try to reflect and remember...

How do you know God?

How have you experienced the Holy moving in your life?

What was significant to you, as you've come to believe?

What is it that supports you spiritually?

Have you felt God's presence in your life – when you were in danger? Lonely? Or suffering?

How is it when you pray? When you speak to God?

Can you experience God with you, responding to you?

Can you imagine God with arms to hold you, and a lap to keep you safe?

Have you experienced God through people, people who love you, who accept you as you are, who listen?

Remember... see their faces. Be thankful for them...

Or: have you recognised God in an encounter with a stranger; someone there when you needed them, or someone whose need you responded to?

Have you experienced God in hospitality?

In the beauty of nature?

Have you met God in silence or in song, in the middle of the night, or in a dream or a vision? In loving and forgiving? Dancing and praising?  
Can you remember these moments in which God has met you, and you've met God?  
Were these ordinary everyday things or extraordinary experiences?

It is such a mystery, such a miracle, how God shows himself or herself to us... how we can recognise God in giving and receiving, in smiles, in hugs, and also in cries.

And I often wonder, how – how on earth can we show the joys and blessings and also the pain and doubts that shape our lives?

How can I share with you my connection with the Holy, the everlasting, the unfathomable? And do I, do we share often enough?

Sharing stories is one way: biblical stories, old and new stories, stories of how God moved in our lives through good times and bad.

And although adults often have trouble sharing their experiences with God, we should all try to do it.

For God's sake, for our own sake, and for our children's sake.

We should all try to make this church a place where we all get to see God.

I must say, I believe that here in this community we can see God.

We give and are given opportunities to meet the Holy.

Let's not talk God into heaven but meet him or her in one another.

Let us catch a glimpse of God every now and again, and let us tell others about it.

And if we worry about the right words and images to express ourselves, and if we are in doubt how they will be received by others, then let us remember Paul, who openly confessed that talking about God makes him tremble, yet who, with his life and faith, has forever changed the world.

Amen.

### **Prayer**

God of love, God of hope, God of grace –

that we meet you in one another,

that we meet you in this world,

this is all we ask today – and we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.