

The 10th Sunday after Trinity (Proper 16)

*St Mary the Virgin, St Briavel's and St Mary's Magdalene,
Hewelsfield*

Hebrews 12:18-29

Luke 13:10-17

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

The former United States Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld, was I think the person who used the phrase “known unknowns” in a press conference at some point or other. He was using the phrase in a slightly political way in order to wriggle out of answering some questions that he was posed. But that phrase, which I think actually comes originally from some American psychologists, is a way of summing up whether we *know* something or not.

There are some things in life that we know about, aren't there? My foot hurts. I know that.

And there are other things in life that we don't know. What is the exact moment that I will die?

Other things are less certain. There are some things that I know I don't know much about. Some things are so mysterious and out of reach that I don't even know that I don't know them

Don't panic, and don't walk out if this is all sounding horribly esoteric and irrelevant!

Our readings today are about what are the things we *know*, and what are the things that we don't know. And a warning about being a bit smug and assuming we know the answers when we don't.

That passage from Hebrews is extraordinary isn't it?! A description of the sort of God that we approach in worship, that we approach when we pray. That we approach in relationship as Christian people. And the passage reminds us that there are things we know about God, and things that we don't.

We know that we have come to Mount Zion. Let me just read you that verse from the reading again: “you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous, and to Jesus.”

Think about that. We few gathered here this morning are in the city of God. Surrounded by innumerable angels. Surrounded by the spirits of the righteous. And in the presence of Jesus. Hold that in your mind when we come to the Eucharistic Prayer and we say that we are surrounded by angels, and archangels, and all the company of heaven. It's true, brothers and sisters. We know they are with us, though just out of sight.

So we know that. And yet our God, in the closing words of our reading, is a consuming fire. Now you will have seen in the newspapers and on the news over the past month images of wildfires in our own country. We had a huge one down in Dorset, half an hour's drive or so from where Emma and I live. So we know about fire. It is wild, uncontrollable, powerful, and absolutely not under our control. And that is an image that the Bible uses about God as well. Often about God in the person of the Holy Spirit. Tongues of fire at Pentecost. The burning bush that Moses encountered. So we know that we are with God. But we absolutely can't control God. We cannot predict what God will do, and indeed we are warned against that. Don't try to box God in. Don't presume to be in control. We cannot know God entirely.

And our gospel reading picks up these themes. Jesus performs a miracle of healing, but he does it on the Sabbath. On a Saturday. And the leader of the synagogue objects, because you're not supposed to do anything other than the essentials on the sabbath. The sabbath is for worshipping God, and not stuff that can wait until next day. Many of us might remember the conversations around Sunday trading in this country in the 1990s. Should people be able to go to the supermarket, or buy a book or some music Sunday. Surely that can wait until Monday. It's an extra it's not essential. They thought they knew what God wants.

And here is where Jesus just zeros in really firmly. He uses that wonderful image of leading your animal to water. He says to go leader of the synagogue, and presumably to many others who were there to worship: are you telling me that you wouldn't feed your donkey, or your ox, on the sabbath? Maybe relate that to our own situations a bit more: if you're one of the farmers of these parishes, are you really not going to feed your animals on a Sunday? Surely that is essential? It's a basic dignity to be given food and water every day, even on the sabbath. Or those of us with pets: dogs, cats, rabbits, horses: how many of us think, oh I won't feed the cats today because it Sunday. That's an extra. That's a luxury. I'll feed the cat tomorrow. We wouldn't dream of it.

And that is the point Christ is making. You don't know this. Your 'knowing' is mistaken. Healing this woman is not an extra. It isn't a luxury. Giving back the fullness of life to this person can't wait until the next day. Because God doesn't wait until tomorrow to offer us the fullness of life. Jesus is not saying don't keep the sabbath as a special day. Jesus is not saying every day is the same, and we shouldn't try to keep Sunday a bit special. Maybe we should be keeping Sunday a bit more special, as modern culture has tended to make this day absolutely the same as every other day of the week. But that isn't Jesus' point. His point is that God wants to

meet us now. And meeting God is not an extra. Meeting God is not a bonus that you tack on at the end if you've got a bit of time. And restoring someone's dignity to them, opening a channel for someone to meet the transforming, delivering power of God is not an extra. It's an essential. And it is a moment of worship. This is exactly what *should* be happening on the sabbath.

And of course that's exactly what happens to us as we gather in church on Sunday. We meet that same power of God, to say to us, here's something you *can* know: you are set free. We heard it when we made our confession together: that absolution. That promise God knows us, loves us, and forgives us. We will meet it again in a few moments at the altar, when bread and the wine, literally the provisions for our journey, are given to us again, bringing healing and deliverance and strength for the next week. And we will meet it at the very end in the words of blessing. God saying to us: go on your way now, back out into the world, with my love and power and strength so that in the next six days, whenever you meet someone who is struggling, you can feed them too.

Meeting God, encountering that life-changing grace, is not an extra. It is an essential. Just like we would never dream of letting the cat or the dog wait until tomorrow for food or drink, so God wouldn't dream of making us wait until tomorrow to meet his love. That's a known known! Exactly what he will gift us remains to be seen.

Yes, Sunday should be special. But it should be special because every Sunday reminds us that God will never ask us to wait. Amen.