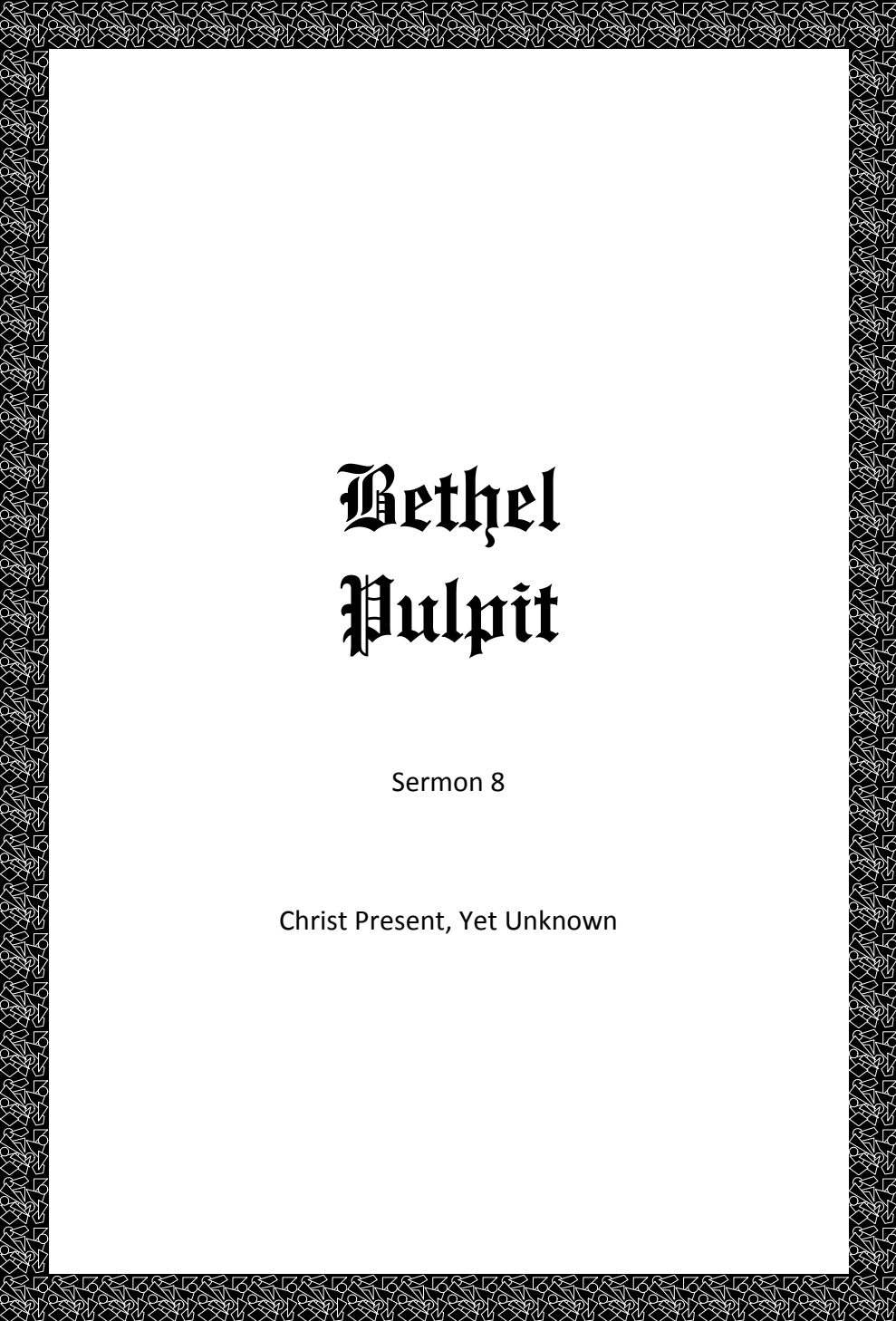




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 8

Christ Present, Yet Unknown

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 20th October, 1985**

Text: *"Jesus saith unto him, Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known Me, Philip?" (John 14. 9.)*

Some of the most sacred truths in all Scripture are revealed in this chapter. Look at this beautiful opening: "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in Me." What a claim to full equality with His Father! "Ye believe in God." So may all your trust be in Me. Commit everything to Me. Leave everything with Me.

Then there is that wonderful revelation of heaven. "In My Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto Myself; that where I am, there ye may be also."

Now there are some of the most beautiful truths in this chapter. But have you noticed that so many of them are spoken in response to questions asked by the disciples? You see, the Lord Jesus was not only their Saviour: He was their Teacher. And beloved friends, we need the Lord Jesus to save us, to save us by His precious blood, to save us with His great salvation, and we need Him to teach us, because we are so weak and so helpless and so ignorant, and we know nothing unless He teaches us.

The Lord Jesus here taught His immediate disciples personally. Now, of course, He is no longer on earth; He is glorified in heaven. But before the end of this chapter He says, "But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in My name, He shall teach you all things." Now we do need that divine teaching. I would press that point on the little ones in Zion, young believers, young Christians, whether you are young in years or old in years. You do need that gracious teaching.

You see, there is a temptation with us that the Lord must begin and save us, and then we have to carry on. I remember it almost came to me like a revelation from heaven many years ago: "And they shall be all taught of God." It was a beautiful word to me, to be able to rely on the

Holy Spirit's teaching, to be able to look to the Holy Spirit for His kind teaching. O but do seek to be taught.

When I was young, I used to love to be, if possible, with old ministers, and I learnt so much from them – so many things doctrinally and also so many things spiritually. But it is one thing to be with an old minister, and another thing to be with the Lord Himself. “They shall be all taught of God.” O do seek that divine teaching. We have the Bible, we have the preaching, but we need that teaching directly from God. You see the life of the Lord Jesus as the great Teacher, taking His disciples by the hand, so kindly leading them, telling them, showing them, correcting them.

So much of the wonderful revelation in this chapter is in answer to questions that the disciples, asked. And let us be clear. They were not the best questions, were they? The Lord Jesus spoke so lovingly to them. He said, “Whither I go ye know, and the way ye know.” Poor Thomas (the same spirit all along), said, “Lord, we know not whither Thou goest; and how can we know the way?” Now it was not a very good question. It was not a very honouring question to the Lord Jesus. But He gave a most blessed answer. “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by Me.” He reveals the new and living way that will take a guilty sinner to heaven through His own Person and merit and blood.

“No man cometh unto the Father, but by Me.” There is something striking about it, something exclusive about it – only one Lamb, only one sacrifice, only one fountain opened, only one Mediator, only one way back to God. “No man cometh unto the Father, but by Me.” It was in answer to a question.

Later on in the chapter, it is not Thomas, but Judas – not the traitor. Have you noticed how lovingly the Holy Ghost clears up his character? “Not Iscariot.” I wonder whether anyone here is ever tempted lest you should be a Judas Iscariot. He went a long way. He was even a chosen disciple. It is a mystery and we do not understand it. He preached, and he must have preached the truth. “Not Iscariot,” says the Holy Ghost of the other disciple, to clear up for ever his character.

But perhaps some of you are tried and tempted lest you should be an Iscariot. I remember years ago going one evening to preach. It was a

third service and I was tired and could not think very clearly. I had this most solemn word on my spirit: "Not Iscariot." I was so tried that there might be a right delineation between an Iscariot and a true child of God. As I was reading the chapter through, one passage arrested me: "And from that time he sought opportunity to betray Him." I said immediately, "No child of God ever did that, and none ever will." A child of God may be left to fall, like Peter, may be left to deny Him, may be left to many a sin. But no child of God will "seek opportunity" to betray Him. O you do not know what you might do, child of God, left to yourself in an awful moment. But I do not believe you will ever seek an opportunity to betray Him on whom your hope of heaven depends. "Not Iscariot."

Judas, not Iscariot, puts another question: "Lord, how is it that Thou wilt manifest Thyself unto us, and not unto the world?" One of the old preachers said that he wondered if Judas was somewhat of an Arminian! The Lord did not give him a straight answer, but He gave him a gracious answer. "If a man love Me, he will keep My words: and My Father will love him, and We will come unto him, and make Our abode with him."

And so it is here with Philip. Philip makes a remark, almost a foolish remark. The Lord Jesus is speaking so beautifully concerning Himself and His union with His Father. He says, "If ye had known Me, ye should have known My Father also." O Philip's ignorance! "Lord, shew us the Father, and it sufficeth us." Never bother about all these other things. If we just see God the Father, then that is all we need. He has completely misunderstood all that the Lord Jesus has been teaching him. "Jesus saith unto him, Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known Me, Philip? he that hath seen Me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, Shew us the Father?" This gentle, loving rebuke. "Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me?"

Well, you know, one thing is a little encouraging, and that is that these were the honoured apostles of the Lamb, and yet they knew so little, and yet they displayed so much ignorance. Sometimes you and I mourn over how little we know. We have to say, and painfully feel it:

"Tis of Thee I little know,
And ah! still less enjoy."

But look at these beloved apostles of the Lamb and how long it took them to learn, and how little they really knew. We are brought to this: it is only by gracious teaching in our hearts and by divine revelation that we can ever really learn the truth. We can hear it a thousand times over and not really hear it, not really be established in it.

Another thing that we learn here is this. People often speak of how wonderful it would have been to have been on earth when the Lord Jesus was here, to have listened to His gracious words, to have heard Him speak, to have been permitted to go to Him, to converse with Him. Now I believe that most of God's people at times in their lives think that, if they do not say it. But you know, it took the same power when the Lord Jesus was speaking as it takes concerning the preaching of the gospel today. Now do you believe it? So black, so hard, so obdurate is the heart of man that multitudes listened to the very words that fell from the lips of the Lord Jesus, but they had no gracious effect. They did not understand them. They did not graciously receive them. And even with His own immediate disciples, and (apart from Judas Iscariot) they were His own dear children, blessed with faith in Him, just the communication with Him day by day, the outward communion, did not profit their souls. That is very solemn and it comes very close. They were godly men – not worldlings – and they were with the Lord Jesus for three years, almost day in and day out, and yet they knew so little. We need divine revelation. We need divine application.

Now there is another thing. Although these disciples knew so little, yet the Lord Jesus dearly loved them and He had called them, and they dearly loved Him. These disciples were not living in the past century or the present day where there are the creeds and articles of faith and good books and treatises of divinity. You and I have got more head knowledge than these blessed disciples, but they had one thing in their hearts, and that was a burning love towards the Person of the Redeemer. It was their only hope and their only salvation, and that is where they excel us. The church of God today has the knowledge, for the most part, but what about that burning love, that love to the Person of the Redeemer? You say, I cannot understand a man like Thomas, or a man like Judas, or a man like Philip talking as they did. Well, secular history tells us that all three sealed their testimony with their blood. All three died a martyr's death, rather than

deny their Master. It is love to Christ. What is the religion of the Lord Jesus, if it is destitute of love?

That was a remarkable word, before the Lord Jesus put this question, when He said, “Whither I go ye know, and the way ye know.” He was assuring them that they had a gracious knowledge of the truth, howbeit small. One of Satan’s great temptations over the years has been this: to persuade the Lord’s people that they have no grace, to persuade them that they do not know anything savingly and graciously. One of Satan’s masterpieces has always been this, and he has overturned multitudes by it. Satan very easily shows you that you do not know *everything*. His reasoning is false, and it is this: that because you do not know *everything*, you know *nothing*. These beloved disciples did not know much, but they did know something, and the Lord dearly loved them and they dearly loved the Lord in return.

I want to speak to you this evening concerning the Lord’s word to Philip, a word of rebuke, a word of solemn reproof, yet spoken so gently, so affectionately. “Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known Me, Philip?” Do you not know Me any better than this? Have you not realised My teaching any better than this? Have you not known more of My grace, more of My salvation? Is this all you know?

Well, the first thing that comes out with such emphasis is this: *that the vital point above everything else is the knowledge of Christ*. What if we have everything else, and we are destitute of this? What if we possess everything else and we are wrong here, right everywhere else, but wrong in the one point that matters? It is not just knowing about the Lord Jesus, not just knowing of Him, but that vital, personal, saving knowledge of Christ in which, and only in which, is eternal life. That which is God’s work in our hearts and that which is linked with repentance. O to know ourselves and to know God! To know ourselves in our helplessness and weakness and sin and guilt, and to know God in Christ as all our salvation. “That I may know Him.” That is the vital thing. Do not be satisfied with anything short of this.

“To know my Jesus crucified,
By far excels all things beside.”

“Jesus saith unto him, Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known Me, Philip?” In a sense the Lord has been with all His creatures all through their lives though in another sense He is very solemnly and eternally absent from many of them. But there is one sense in which the Lord is with all His creatures. When a person is born into this world, the Lord is there. There cannot be any birth, but the Lord is there. All the providences that come are in God’s hand. The gifts of nature, the sun, the rain, they all come from God and from His providence. The Lord is with all His creatures. He opens His hand and satisfies the desires of every living thing. The Lord is with His creatures as He fulfils His ancient promise. He gives the summer, the winter, the day, the night, the cold, the heat.

Now in a very real sense the Lord is with all His creatures from the day of their birth to the day of their death, and yet the solemn thing is that the world knows Him not. The world does not know that He is near. It is just as in the days of His incarnation. “He was in the world, and the world was made by Him, and the world knew Him not. He came unto His own, and His own received Him not.” So today in His providence and in His general goodness to all His creatures as He causes the rain to fall on the just and on the unjust, God is not far from any of His creatures, but for the most part they do not see it, do not realise it, do not believe it, do not fear it, and the Lord at last will speak some such thing as this, and that sinner, whoever it is, will be without excuse: “Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known Me,” and lived and died in wilful ignorance of Me? “Depart from Me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.”

Is that true of some here? In that sense, as His creatures, the Lord has been with you since the day of your birth. His all-seeing eye has been watching you, seeing everything that ever you do. But has He been so long time with you, and yet you have not yet realised it? His ear is listening to every word you speak. His all-seeing eye is viewing everything you think. You cannot escape from God.

Now with each one, with each of God’s creatures, from the moment of birth the Lord is there, near, round about, watching, giving so many mercies in providence, showing so much of His bountiful kindness, and the world does not even acknowledge it. Are you amongst those who

do not acknowledge it? Not once in the day do you bow your head to thank Him? Not once in the day do you stand still and realise that His hand is upon you? Not once in the day do you pray to Him? But O to hear this just condemnation at last: “Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not know Me?”

Now let us bring this a little nearer. Among those who revere the Lord’s name, the Lord Jesus is present in His holy Word, the Bible. Now in that sense with everyone here the Lord Jesus can say, “I have been so long time with you,” since the time you were first able to read, since the time you first had a Bible. The Lord is very present in His holy Word, for He is the substance of it, the glory of it. Yet there are some who read the Bible all their lives and never see the Lord Jesus there. “Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known Me, Philip?”

Well, if you do not even read those Bibles, if you do not even search those Bibles, if you do not even pray over those Bibles, you will not know the Lord Jesus there. You will not find the Lord Jesus there.

That was a good prayer that the little girl wrote on the fly-leaf of the Bible she was given:

“Divine Instructor, gracious Lord,
Be Thou for ever near;
Teach me to love Thy sacred Word,
And find my Saviour there.”

Now have you ever found the Saviour in the Word of God? “Search the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of Me.” “Have I been so long time with you” – in the Word of My grace – “and yet hast thou not known Me?” Bring it lower – yet hast thou not *sought* Me?

I want to bring it closer still. Those who attend the house of God where the truth is preached, the Lord Jesus is present there. Now do you believe it, or is it just something that we say? “Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them.” I realise that in its context it is not so much speaking of public worship. It is speaking of a case of discipline in the church. But it is equally true of public worship.

Now the ancient promise is this: “In all places where I record My name I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee.” “Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known Me,” coming to chapel so long, coming to the place where the Lord’s name is recorded, where His honour dwelleth, coming to the place where His gospel is preached, His glory displayed, His name exalted, where He says, “This is My rest for ever: here will I dwell; for I have desired it,” where He makes the place of His feet glorious. But does the Lord Jesus have to say this to you and me – “Have I been so long time with you?” – in the public means of grace and in the preaching of the gospel, in the sanctuary, in the prayer meeting, in the house of God – “Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known Me?”

Some of you may be troubled about it, severely troubled. It is a solemn thing if you are not troubled about it. Real religion says this:

“But ah! what is the house to me,
Unless the Master I can see?”

Real religion comes to the house of God with that desire: “That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death.” It is that vital, personal, saving, experimental knowledge of the Son of God. Nothing else will do. I say it in all faithfulness and yet in all love and affection to this congregation: “Have I been so long time with you?” – coming to the house of God so long, hearing sermons so long, listening to preaching so long, and yet no personal, vital knowledge of the Son of God, and perhaps even no living desire for it. “Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known Me, Philip?”

Let me now bring it closer still, as spoken to God’s people, the living family of God. “Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known Me, Philip?” Of course, with the people of God, they *do* know the Lord. In greater or less measure they must, for He says, “They shall all know Me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them.” And you see, Philip in his measure knew Christ and loved Him and followed Him. But the point was this: Philip, is it so little you know after all this time? And you know, I do feel that solemnly we have to fall under this loving rebuke, those of us who fear His name and love and profess it.

“‘Tis of Thee I little know,
And ah! still less enjoy.”

The Lord presses this in our consciences, “Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known Me?” Some of us have professed the Lord now for many years, “and yet hast thou not known Me” any better than this? Then why is there not the prayer, and why is there not the gratitude, and why is there not the soft heart, and why is there not the love? “Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known Me?” What about the pressing through the crowd, touching the hem of His garment? What about the exercise of faith? What about living upon Him, leaning on Him, hanging on Him? What about entering into the holiest by the blood of Jesus? What of nearness and sweet union and communion with Him?

You know, in those blessed days at Dundee, M’Cheyne preached a sermon on this text and when it was published it had this title: “Christ Present but Unknown.” But we have to fall beneath this rebuke. It is part of our desolate condition, our barren condition. O how little we really know of these wonderful manifestations of Christ to our soul, of Christ making Himself known, revealing Himself, speaking to us, drawing near, shedding abroad His love in our hearts.

There is a kind of sadness here in the Lord’s words. We have all the form and the doctrine and the hymns and the prayer meetings and the articles of faith. But have we this vital, personal, saving knowledge of the Son of God, because nothing else will take us to heaven?

“Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known Me, Philip?” Well, I am going to leave it with you, but I am also going to leave it with the Lord, and may He not leave it with you. May He make it work in your hearts. “Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou now known Me, Philip?”

Just one last word. The Lord Jesus, when He made this loving complaint to Philip, said, “So long time.” Such a long time, Philip! How long was it? Now Philip was one of the very first of the disciples, but how long was it? Not more than three years. “Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known Me, Philip?” Even the youngest ones here, most of them have been attending chapel for more than three years.

Even the youngest ones, most of them have been able to read their Bibles for three years. Some here have been attending thirty years, sixty years, and some have made a profession not just for three years, but nearer thirty years or more.

My point is this. If the Lord Jesus looks at those three years and says to Philip, “so long time,” what does the Lord Jesus say to you and me, after these many, many years of attending His house, reading His Word and making an open profession of His name? How far short we come! Yet it is still the one thing needful – a vital, personal, saving knowledge of the Son of God. There is no substitute for this, the only way to heaven, the only way of eternal life. “Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known Me, Philip?”