

# Can We Know Christ Today?



Paolo Veronese, *Pilgrims of Emmaus* c.1560

IT IS A COMMON THING FOR US TO DEFINE our religion in terms of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. We not only claim to know *about* Him, we actually claim to *know* Him and this is reflected in many of our prayers and hymns; they are addressed directly to Christ. We speak to Him just as we speak to any other person. For example, one hymn, written by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux in the Twelfth Century, says:

*“Jesus, the very thought of Thee  
With sweetness fills my breast  
But sweeter far Thy face to see  
And in Thy presence rest.”*

It had been over a thousand years since Jesus walked the earth as a living, breathing, human being yet all the thoughts are expressed in the second person. The writer was speaking not about Jesus, but **to** Him. Still today, eight hundred years later, millions of Christians sing that hymn in the same spirit of personal communication. What are we to

make of that? Is this only a pleasant fantasy or can we actually know Christ today?

What do we mean by *knowing*? It could mean to be familiar with the biological facts about a person. For example, all of us know or can know George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, etc. Just pick up an encyclopedia and read about them. Knowing can also mean to recognize by sight or sound. For example, we all know some former or present Presidents like John F. Kennedy, Donald Trump, or Joe Biden. Their pictures either were or are on television, newspapers, internet, etc. every day.

Another kind of knowing comes from a shared physical presence. For example, this is the way we know our families, friends, and coworkers: we live with them, talk to them, and see them and, sometimes, we touch them. Then there is a deeper level. We can know the thoughts and feelings of someone—for example, husbands and wives often have this kind of knowledge about each other—where

one can often finish the sentences of the other. When they can do that, they know each other fairly well. But to share another's values, to care about the same things, and be committed to the same cause is the deepest knowledge.

So we ask—can we know Christ today? Obviously, there are some ways we *cannot* know Him. The first disciples knew Him as a visible and tangible presence. They could see and touch Him. He showed them the nail marks in His hands. He spoke to them with audible words. We could wish for that kind of concrete knowledge, but we will never have it, not in this life anyway.

Another question comes up: “How can we get to know someone whom we have never seen or heard?” Seems impossible, but perhaps it is not as strange as we might think. There was a time when Jesus was seen and heard by crowds of people, but very few actually knew Him. Judas Iscariot, one of His chosen Twelve, lived with Jesus for three years yet never knew Him at all. I have known men and women who were married, shared the same house, the same bed for years, yet did not know each other at all.

Physical presence does not guarantee personal knowledge. I know some people whom I have never seen better than some others I have interacted with for years. You may have read books on a particular saint and he or she helped shape your way of thinking. That saint may have inspired you in times of adversity and taught you about the true meaning of love, perhaps more than people you know around you.

It is true that we cannot know Christ with our eyes and ears as the Apostles did, but it may not be the disadvantage that we think it is. We most likely would not have known Him any better than we do in our present time. Chances are, we might

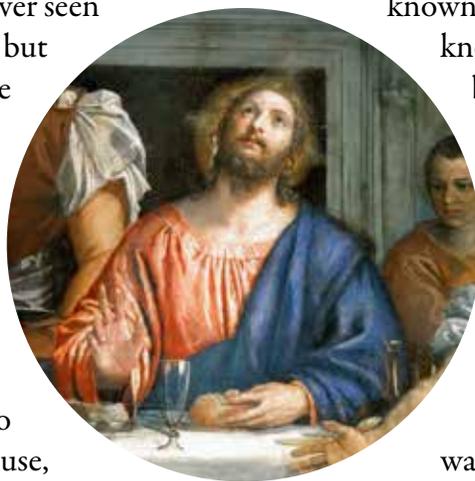
not have known Him at all. When the religious authorities of His day insisted that He was an imposter, we might have listened to them. We might have joined the ranks of those who clamored for His death. There is a better chance of knowing Him now than His contemporaries had back then.

Consider then some of the ways we *can* know Christ today—In Saint Luke's Gospel, we read of two disciples who walked with the Risen Christ from Jerusalem to Emmaus yet never recognized Him. However, that evening at the dinner table, when Jesus broke a loaf of bread their eyes were opened and they knew Him. Luke was telling his fellow disciples that, although they had never

known Christ physically, they could know Him ‘in the breaking of the bread.’ (Lk 24:35) The same is true for you and me. We, too, can know our Lord in the breaking of the bread. All that is required is a venture of faith. Something like the same venture of faith required to know anyone.

If I want to know you and you want to know me, both of us are going to have to run some risks. We will need to trust each other, at least a little bit. The first disciples did that with Jesus; they came to know Him because of how they lived—not so much because of where or when they lived. They trusted Him enough to try His way of living. Those who didn't, did not know Him.

Can you and I know Christ today? The answer is a conditional “yes.” Saint John said it like this: “The way we can be sure of our knowledge of Him is to keep His commandments.” (1 Jn 2:4) That is the condition. We can know Him if, and **only** if, we dare to try His kind of living. There is no other way of knowing Christ. There never has been.



**“If I want to know you and you want to know me, both of us are going to have to run some risks.”**

