

21<sup>st</sup> August 2021

## Knowledge

**“Skill comes so slow, and life so fast doth fly,  
We learn so little and forget so much.”**

*John Davies, Nosce Teipsum (1599)*

Inscribed in the forecourt of Temple of Apollo at Delphi were three maxims as guiding principles for the ancient Greeks: “Know Thyself”, “Nothing to Excess”, and “Surety Brings Ruin”. The first of these was taken up by the Romans and gives us the aphorism in Latin, *nosce te ipsum*.

When the English poet, John Davies, elaborated on this phrase in his expansive poem on human knowledge in 1599, he began by asking:

*Why did my parents send me to the schools  
That I with knowledge might enrich my mind?  
Since the desire to know first made men fools,  
And did corrupt the root of all mankind.*

and suggests mid-way through a lengthy and detailed exploration,

*All things without, which round about we see,  
We seek to know, and how therewith to do;  
But that whereby we reason, live, and be,  
Within ourselves we strangers are thereto.*

His reasoning, from the Greeks, through the Romans, to his own age – and now to the present day – is that true knowledge is about *self* and not about facts or skills. Life moves on so quickly, he says. We’ll learn a lot and forget so much. But if *nosce te ipsum* is the aphorism we live by, then what we *really* know and understand about ourselves will outlive and supersede all the knowledge that is supposed to “enrich my mind”.

I’ve never used the *Enneagram* or *Myers Briggs* personality tests, though I like to think I have enough self-knowledge from life experience, counselling and training to help me understand who I am, why I react to things the way I do and how I relate to the people around me. But I’ve still got a lot to learn. *Nosce te ipsum* will always matter.

So my plea today is this: let *nosce te ipsum* be a mantra for us all. For the more we know ourselves, the better we are.

### **A prayer for today**

*Lord, you know me better than I know myself. Help me to keep learning about who I really am so that I can better understand your will and your ways. Amen*