

The Unknown God

In the name of him who suffered once for sin, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, dear friends in Christ: The grand city of Athens in the first century was the undisputed cultural and intellectual capital of the world. If you wanted to be on the cutting edge of science, medicine, architecture, engineering, philosophy, or any of the arts then Athens was the place to be. It's where all the great new ideas were being developed and discussed. It's where the most influential plays and most popular music were being written. Though the center of political power had shifted to Rome – for the Romans pretty much ruled the world – everyone, even the Romans, looked to Athens to determine what to think, what to believe, how to behave, how to dress, and even for what to eat and how to prepare it. All eyes were on Athens. All ears were turned toward it. And interestingly enough, in today's first Scripture reading we find the Athenians with their eyes and ears fixed on St. Paul.

Paul had been traveling throughout Greece, spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ in every city he visited. It was his usual practice to go first to the local Jewish synagogue and proclaim Christ there. And that makes sense because most of the big cities had a small Jewish community that gathered regularly for worship, and there in these assemblies Paul would find people who knew the promises of God and looked forward to their fulfillment. All he had to do in such places was to explain how Jesus was the promised Savior they'd been waiting for. Typically, he'd get a mixed response. Some of the Jewish believers would rejoice in the good news of Jesus and be baptized as Christians. Others would be unconvinced and want to hear more; so, Paul would meet with them over time, patiently showing them from Scripture how Jesus had fulfilled all the messianic prophecies. Still others would react negatively. And most of the time, because they perceived Paul's teachings about Jesus to be dangerous or heretical, they'd stir up trouble for him. Sometimes they'd attack him physically, or they'd make false accusations to the city magistrates so that he'd be jailed or beaten as a troublemaker. One way or another eventually they'd get him driven out of town. All of which was pretty hard on Paul. But oddly enough, it helped spread the Gospel faster. Because he couldn't remain in any one place very long, he'd have to move on to somewhere else. And every time he did, he left behind a faithful core of believers who formed the seed of a soon-to-be flourishing Christian church. Isn't it funny how those who try to hurt the church of Jesus Christ often end up helping it?

Anyway, it was because Paul had just been forced out of a city called Berea that we find him now in Athens. We're told that Paul was very much disturbed by what he saw there. Here he was in what was hailed as the most enlightened place on earth, and everywhere he looked all he could see were temples containing the idols of false gods: each and every one of them a monument not to man's wisdom, but to his ignorance and folly. In them the Athenians worshipped gods that were not the creators of heaven and earth and all things in them, but rather gods that were created by the hands of men. They were gods whose stories were the products of the imaginations of men. And for that reason, in their stories the gods pretty much behaved like men – specifically like fallen, sinful, greedy men with lots of power and ambition. They were gods whose favor could be bought for a price like a gift of some kind or a mighty deed done for the god's

benefit; and they were gods who tended to hold bitter grudges against those who had supposedly offended them. The word “forgiveness” was not part of their vocabulary.

And so the Athenians, for all their acclaimed wisdom, lived in superstitious fear. This is evidenced by the abnormally large number of idol temples and altars scattered throughout the city. I mean, Paul had been in dozens of other Greek cities, all of which had temples to the gods and goddesses of Greek mythology; but it's only here in Athens that we're told how vexing it was for him to see so many. Part of that, no doubt, was simply due the large size and population of the city, which would account for a greater number of worship sites; but more than that, it seems that the Athenians were particularly concerned with covering all the bases. You see, in the Greek religion the gods and goddesses had specialized areas of interest. So if you were a farmer, for example, you'd go to one god to make an offering to ensure the fertility of your soil, to another to get the right amount of rain you needed, to others to hold off on the lightning, hail, and winds that might destroy the crops, to another for plenty of sunshine, to another for a good harvest, and then finally to another to ensure that once the harvest was in it wouldn't get ruined or rat infested in the barn. You might also hedge your bet by offering gifts to some of the other deities who were responsible for other factors that could influence the outcome one way or another. And you had to be careful doing all this because the gods and goddesses were a fickle and jealous lot – and they had a definite pecking order. So, you had to make sure that you gave each deity his or her appropriate due without either over or under doing it. If your sacrifice was too small or inexpensive, it might anger a god who felt slighted. Or if you overdid it in your devotion to one deity, the other gods and goddesses (who seemed always to be fighting and competing for power and honor among themselves) might feel they didn't get their fair share. And mind you, this is just for farming. Every other facet of your life, like marriage and family matters, health, politics, business, trade, military security—everything in your life was controlled by the gods, so you had to keep them all happy. And if you had problems in any area of your life, you had to figure out which god or gods you had offended that now needed to have their tender feelings soothed so that they would smile on you again.

So, you get the picture: If you're an Athenian you're always going about on pins and needles trying to ensure the continued favor of the gods and being careful not to offend any of them – and of course, you could never be sure about any of this. Idols are not known for being particularly articulate. They can't tell you what they're thinking. All you could do is ask the priests who ran the various temples – and oddly enough each of them would tell you that you should patronize most the god they were serving. After all, they got a piece of the action. But suppose you did all that. Suppose you'd faithfully done your duty for all of the gods. You'd gone to each and every temple and sacrificed there exactly what the priests told you were the best offerings to secure the favor of their respective deities – suppose you did all that and still your life was full of problems. Then what did you do? What did you do when your religion failed you – when in your misery and desperation you asked the priests “What more can I do” and all they could do is shrug their shoulders and say, “I don't know”?

It was precisely for situations such as this that they had set up in Athens an altar to “an unknown god”. The Athenians, in their worldly wisdom, reasoned that if you had properly paid your respects to all the gods that were known and still you weren't getting your troubles solved, it must be because there was a god out there who wasn't known who also needed to be appeased. How in the world anyone knew what to bring as a gift to an unknown god is anybody's guess. I imagine it depended on how badly you needed

to grab his attention. But what this altar was, of course, was sort a court of last resort. It was a place to try to make your complaints heard when you felt that no one up there was listening. And for that reason, I'm guessing that it was a pretty popular place to worship. I mean, when all you're doing is praying to idols anyway, there really is no one listening. And the existence of this altar seemed to be, in some small way, an admission of that. It said, "Our religion doesn't work. Especially when times are bad, there don't seem to be any answers. We really don't know who or what is out there. And so with this altar we're groping about blindly trying to reach the unknown god." And for the Athenians, who so prided themselves for their supposedly unsurpassed knowledge, that was a pretty bitter and glaring admission to make.

Paul saw this as his opportunity – an open doorway through which he might be able to lead people to come to know and trust the God they admitted they didn't know. And I've got to hand it to Paul. His heart really went out to these people who imagined themselves to be so learned and yet were trapped in superstitious fear and ignorance. We read that he started in the Jewish synagogue as was his custom. Whether he was successful there, we're not told. But he didn't stay there. He took his message to the business section of town – to the open marketplace, sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ with anyone who would listen. It was there that he attracted the attention of some of the philosophers who held their discussions way up on the Areopagus. It was the central think tank of Athens, a place where the greatest minds assembled to hear and discuss the latest ideas in science, religion, and philosophy. You might think of it as a combination of a university campus, a forum for the national academy of the sciences, and a living hall of fame for Nobel Prize winners. Hearing Paul speak in the market, presenting ideas that were new to their ears, we read that they literally grabbed him and set him before their august assembly.

And the difference between Paul and the people gathered there would have been immense. His hearers: wealthy, highly educated, elitist to the point of snobbery, accustomed to privilege and comfort; all excellent speakers, trained in the art of rhetoric, very erudite and refined. They are, by all earthly standards, the wisest of the wise. Meanwhile Paul is small of stature, rather sickly looking, still bearing the welts and bruises of the beating he received in Philippi. He stands before them in rough and worn clothes, his halting voice affected with an accent that tells them he's a comparatively uneducated yokel from some far flung, insignificant corner of the empire. They refer to him in unflattering terms. The word that's translated "babbler" is literally "seed picker". It means a little bird that scratches about here and there looking for tidbits to eat – and it's used here in the sense of someone who goes about stealing fragments of ideas from various teachers and who then assembles them into a new system of philosophy that he claims is his own.

So, with all this against him you'd think maybe Paul would be more than a little intimidated to be addressing this group of scholars. But he's not. And the reason for that is he sees the situation as it truly is. Despite appearances and for all their acclaimed wisdom these men know nothing that ultimately matters. Sure, they are wise in the ways of the world, and that's helpful for getting along in the world; but this world and everything and everyone on it are doomed one day to come to an end. And at that point no amount of learning or wisdom will have any significance at all. The only thing that will matter is knowing the One True God who has revealed himself in the person and work of Jesus Christ. That's true wisdom. That's divine wisdom. And here on the Areopagus it's contained within a scraggly "seed picker" named Paul. No, it doesn't look

like much. Just as it didn't look like much when it was gasping for breath, nailed to a bloody cross outside the city of Jerusalem several years earlier. But there the Unknown God chose to reveal himself in pure, unbounded self-sacrificial love and compassion for his foolish and rebellious creatures. There in the suffering of the cross he revealed who he truly is – and indeed, he showed the only way he can truly be known. For without the cross God must be unknown to us: a holy, wrathful, consuming fire dwelling in unapproachable light. But in the cross a bridge is formed – a way for sinners to be cleansed and forgiven not by their puny efforts to earn for themselves the favor of God, but by God's work to overcome and blot out mankind's evil with his own limitless good. Only in the cross and resurrection of Jesus can God be known. And this is the God Paul proclaimed to the Athenians who admitted they didn't know him. He gave the reason for the hope that was in him, sharing his faith in Jesus with gentleness and respect – but equally without compromise or fear of how his words would be received.

And this, I think, is the lesson for us in this section of Scripture. If there is a rough equivalent of what the city of Athens once was in the world today, then we'd probably find it here in the good old USA – not a city, but a whole nation that pretty well sets the trends and standards for the world. And what strikes me is how some of our fellow countrymen have educated themselves out of any belief in God. Claiming to be wise they have become fools. And in their worldly wisdom they have replaced the Creator not with images of stone and precious metals as the people in ancient times once did, but rather with the mindless forces of nature. But true atheists such as these are actually relatively few and far between. Far more people claim to be "agnostics", which means that they're willing to admit that there may be or even that there certainly is a God out there. They just don't know who he (or if they're rabid feminists, *she*) is. And some of them are more than happy to tell you that they're very "spiritual". They do indeed pray and meditate and engage in any number of spiritual disciplines. Others maybe not so much, but they'd still tell you that they believe in "God".

And what's interesting about that is that the very same word "agnostic" is the one that appears in today's text and is translated for us "unknown". The unknown God is literally the *agnostic* God. He is the unknown entity to whom so many of our countrymen, and yes, very often our friends and relatives, cry out in desperation and to whom they blindly grope when bad things happen in their lives. So, what I would have you see is that we stand in pretty much the same place as St. Paul. The culture that surrounds us doesn't give us a lot of credit. They think of us as being somewhat backward and simple for adhering to our faith in Jesus and the sacred Scriptures. But God in his grace has chosen to reveal himself to us through the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. We know him, and we know his love and forgiveness in Christ Jesus. He has hidden in us his true wisdom – the wisdom that overcomes the world and gives eternal life. And he has situated each one of us in the places and positions we are precisely to be his ambassadors and spokespeople to make him known to those who, as yet, don't know him.

May he then give us his Word and Spirit to fearlessly declare the reason for the hope that he's placed within us so that we can make him known whenever and as often as he gives us opportunity. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!