

KNOWING THE UNKNOWN GOD

Text: Acts 17:16-34

Readings: Gen 1:1-10; Gen 1:26-2:3

Theme: Paul preached about God, humanity and Jesus to the philosophers in Athens.

Purpose: To communicate the truth about God, humanity and Jesus Christ so that those who hear might repent and believe in Jesus and know God.

If you took a survey and asked New Zealanders if they believed in God most would say yes. True, there are a few real atheists in NZ, people who do not believe in God or a god at all. And there are a few agnostics, those who don't know whether or not there is a God. But most accept that there is a God.

But what God do they believe in? What is their view of him? Or do they see God as "her"? And from where do they get their information about him – from their own imagination, or their own mind, or from their experience or from various books? What God do *you* believe in?

It would be safe to say that many New Zealanders do not know the God of the Bible. Their view of God is not shaped or formed by what the Bible tells us about him. For most people in this country the God of Christians is an UNKNOWN GOD, maybe also for some of you here today.

The apostle Paul was in Athens speaking to people who did not know the God of the Scriptures. Paul had come from the north of Greece down to Athens in the south. He had left his travelling companions up in Thessalonica and Berea, so he was on his own, free to look around.

Athens was one of the great cities of the ancient world. She had been at the height of her power in the 5th century BC when there was an enormous amount of building and art and writing going on. Even today the ruins that remain give you some idea of the splendour of ancient Athens. In Paul's day there was much to see and admire in the magnificent buildings, beautiful sculptures and libraries full of valuable books.

But as Paul walked around he did not have an eye for the architecture or the statues, rather he "was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols" (v 16). The Greeks were polytheists – they believed in many gods - and they represented their gods with idols and images. There were more idol statues in Athens than in all the other Greek cities combined. The ancient writer Petronius said that it was easier to find a god in Athens than a man. This greatly disturbed Paul – to see people worshipping these false gods.

So he went to the synagogue and reasoned there with the Jews who knew the God of the Scriptures. But he also went into the marketplace, the agora, the centre of public life, and spoke to whoever happened to be there. Athens was home to many philosophers and they were very happy to discuss any new ideas.

There were a number of schools of philosophy in the city. The two main ones were the Epicureans and the Stoics. Some of them began to dispute with Paul. They didn't think much of his ideas; "What is this babbling trying to say?" (v 18). The word translated babbling literally means a seed-picker. It described a person who picked up ideas from here and there and then passed them off as his own. It was a negative term for some-one who had second hand and second rate views. Others thought he was proclaiming Jesus and the resurrection as two additional gods.

They decided to invite him to a meeting of the Areopagus. This was the name of the council or governing body in Athens that supervised education in the city and visiting lecturers. The council met on the Hill of Ares, or Mars Hill, also known as the Areopagus, a marble rock near the Acropolis. He was invited to speak.

He began by saying, “Men of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD” (v 23).

Sometimes the Greeks had to restore an ancient altar to one of their gods and they could not read the original inscription, so they did not know to which god it had been dedicated, so they wrote on it, “TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.”

Paul used this as a point of contact, a stepping stone to tell them about the true God; “Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you” (v 23b).

1. He began by speaking about **GOD**

a. He told them that God had made the world and everything in it – he was the **Creator**.

i. The Epicureans believed that the world was governed by chance. Many believe that today; look at all the people lining up at the Lotto counters on a Saturday afternoon – this might be their lucky break! Fortune might smile on them! The viewpoint of evolution is based on a chance universe; it believes we are what we are because of random chance mutations that were beneficial to the human race.

But the Bible says that the world was not the result of time plus chance but that everything was made by the hand of God and that he “is Lord of heaven and earth” (v 24).

ii. The Stoics had a different idea and they believed that god was in the world, part of the world, immanent in it.

This view is called pantheism and it is the belief of all the Eastern religions of the world today, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, as well as the New Age movement. They believe that god is part of the world; god is in you and you are god.

But Paul said that God was distinct from the world; he is the Creator and this is his creation.

This is a crucial distinction because you will either worship God the Creator or you worship some part of the creation, something in the world.

b. Paul also pointed out that God is **self-sufficient** (v 24-25). He does not depend on us; he does not need our human temples nor does he need to be served by human hands.

We don't need to feed him, like the Buddhist monks who put food offerings in front of the Buddha. We don't need to provide for him, rather he provides for us! “...he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else” (v 25).

He is the Creator and he is self-sufficient.

2. Paul then spoke about **HUMANITY**, about us.

a. He explained that **from one man** God had made all the people of the earth. We all go back to that original couple, Adam and Eve. All the nations of the world come from those first humans.

This would not have appealed to the Jews or the Greeks because both of them thought of themselves as superior to the other races. But Paul wants us to see that originally we all came from the same stock and we are all created by God. If people grasped this today it would perhaps ease some of the tensions between different races and peoples.

b. Paul then explained that God wants you to “**seek him** and perhaps reach out for him and find him” (v 27).

God put you in this world for a purpose - he wants you to know him, to have a relationship with him, to love him and serve him. He wants you to live in a close relationship with him, to know him personally, to walk and talk with him day by day.

Are you seeking God? Are you reaching out for him? Are you finding him?

c. Rather than seeking God we are more often **ignoring** him.

We get caught up in our own lives and get busy doing our own thing.

And we worship idols – not images and idols of gold and silver and stone - but our 20th century idols. An idol is anything that takes the place of God, anything that is more important than the Lord. We worship our appearance, our children, our car, our home, our furniture, our sport, our holidays, or anything else we put in place of God.

Look through the glossy magazines in the bookstores and you'll see these idols displayed on almost every page, tempting us to worship these things!

d. But this is the wrong focus, the wrong direction, the wrong goal. So the Apostle Paul urged the Greeks in Athens to **repent** from this.

“Repent” is not a word you hear very often nowadays. It's associated with “hell-fire and brimstone” preachers. But this is an important word in the Bible. It means to change your mind and your life; to realise you are going in the wrong direction and to turn around, to change course, to alter direction. If your life is focused on the things of this world instead of on God then God himself urges you to repent and to turn to him and seek him so you can find him.

You can seek God in the world he has made. “The heavens declare the glory of God and the skies proclaim the works of his hands” (Ps 19:1). The whole world is evidence that there is a God and that he is the great Creator. But you can only find out so much about God from this world.

If you want to know more about him you need to read the Bible. This book explains who God is, it teaches us about him. You won't have a true or full picture of God unless you read or hear the Bible. The Bible is all important because it tells us about Jesus.

3. Paul concluded his address by speaking about **JESUS**, although he did not mention his name; “For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed” (v 31).

The Greeks were always interested in novelties - the newest and the latest; quite similar to our own world! Paul told them about the newest thing that had happened: God had sent his Son into the world and had raised him from the dead! This was the latest news! And it was *good* news! And today it is still the good news that we bring to this world. It is an old, old story but it comes to us fresh and new because it speaks to our spiritual need today.

Jesus was a man. He was human. He was born into the world like us. We remember his birth at Christmas.

But he was not only a man, he was also God. He came to earth from heaven. He had a human nature and a divine nature; he was man and God.

The Bible tells us that Jesus *died on the cross* to take the punishment of those who believe in him. He did not die for his own sin and evil because he was a perfect man. Rather he died for the sin and evil and wrong of all who believe in him.

God proved this by *raising Jesus from the dead*. He was in the grave for three days and then he got up, alive and well! That's what we remember on Easter Sunday! We celebrate the power and victory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And this Jesus, who died and rose and went to heaven, will *come again!* God has appointed him as the judge. One day all of us will have to stand before the Lord Jesus and give an account of our lives. You will have to do this. Jesus will ask you; “What did you believe about me? What did you believe about God? What or who was first in your life? Did you love and worship the creation or the Creator? Did you seek me so that you might find me?”

What will you say on that day? Will you be able to declare your love for God, your trust in the death and resurrection of Jesus?

The men and women of Athens had listened carefully up to this point.

a. But when he mentioned the resurrection some of them **sneered**.

They sneered because Greek philosophy put all the emphasis on the *spirit* of a person, not the body. They regarded the body as unimportant, secondary. So they did not expect or look for a resurrection of the body. They regarded that as impossible and unnecessary. So they mocked Paul; one translation says, they “burst out laughing!” Maybe that is your reaction to what you have heard.

b. But others said; “We want to **hear you again** on this subject.” They wanted to come back for some more discussion about this subject.

Maybe that describes you; maybe you would like to know more.

If you do then you need to read the Bible. Read one of the gospels to find out more about Jesus.

If you want to know more you are also very welcome to attend the services here on Sunday - anyone is welcome to attend.

c. After Paul left that meeting some people spoke further to him and they **believed**. They believed in God the Creator, they trusted in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Some of these people are mentioned by name: There was Dionysius who was actually a member of the council of the Areopagus; also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

They formed the beginning of the church in Athens, a church which grew and increased as more people believed.

Paul spoke to the people in Athens about the UNKNOWN GOD. He explained that this God was the Creator of the world and that they could know him through Jesus his Son.

Some mocked; others were interested and wanted to know more; still others believed.

What is *your* response?

Amen