

HYMN: 132 ‘Immortal, invisible, God only wise;’ 359 ‘He came down that we may have love;’ 542 ‘Lord, speak to me, that I may speak;’ 519 ‘Love Divine’

Acts 17; 22 - 31

Who is God? What is God? How many answers would there be to those questions. We know we live in a multi-cultural pluralist society and so, the questions about who or what God is will have many answers. Some might say God is creator, prime mover, source. God was the beginning of the universe. Others might say God is a force like love or hope or joy. God is a law or feature of human life. Others again might speak of a supreme being or a higher power.

Our reading from Acts gives us part of a speech Paul made in Athens. Having travelled from Asia Minor to Europe, to the Roman province of Macedonia, Paul and his colleagues, Timothy and Barnabas moved on through Philippi, Thessalonica and Beroea before arriving in Athens. Paul was left alone in Athens whilst the other two returned to work with congregations they had previously founded. Paul’s attention was caught by the idols throughout Athens and he preached the gospel in synagogues and market places. But the speech we read today was made before the Areopagus. The Areopagus was the principle council of Athens which met on a hill also called the Areopagus and it is before this council that Paul makes his speech. Unlike James and John, Simon Peter and Andrew, Paul was not a fisherman, rather he was a man with some education and one who held full Roman citizenship. He was fluent in Greek and quite at home in Athenian society. Although by this time, Athens was perhaps past its heyday, it was still one of the principle centres of culture in the ancient world. The upper classes of Athens were sophisticated and well educated. They were dinner party philosophers. We often joke that in our society, you should never discuss politics, sex or religion – but in Athens, these were popular subjects for polite debate. The Athenians were accused of being novelty seekers, ready to listen to any idea that came along – provided it was new or different.

Paul starts off by talking about an altar which bore the inscription ‘to an unknown God.’ We might imagine that perhaps the Athenians were just trying to hedge their bets – that in a culture which recognised many gods – it might seem safe to have an altar to an unknown god – just in case – so as not to offend. But there is perhaps a more profound and deeper reason for the altar. Many of the Greek altars acknowledged that there is an unknown aspect to God. That if God is to be God – then there must be more than human beings can understand. There is an aspect of God

which is transcendent, beyond human knowledge, beyond human imagining. There is mystery and otherness about God. There is a sense in which God is and must be unknown.

Paul begins by affirming the Athenians for their keen interest in religion. He quotes approvingly from two of their own respected poets. And far from telling them that their religions are all rubbish, he links his message directly to things he has observed in their own religious practice. He had found a shrine in the city dedicated to “the unknown god”, and so he begins by suggesting that the faith he is there to preach is not something strange and new, but rather it is the missing knowledge of a faith that is already within their experience.

Now that raises a question. Is this just a clever bit of public speaking by Paul? Or is he actually speaking with integrity about some deep truths concerning the nature of God? Well, although I think the advertising industry would have been proud of the angle he took, I think we have to conclude that he meant what he said. The quote he uses from the Greek poet Epimenides is particularly instructive. “In God we live and move and have our being.” In using that quote, Paul is saying that no one, regardless of what they might or might not believe, is entirely cut off from God and removed from the influence of God. To live, to move, to be; all is surrounded by God and underpinned by God. A person’s ability to walk across the room is as dependent on God as it is dependent on the oxygen that they breathe. Paul specifically says that God is not far from anyone and is within reach of everyone. And that is such an important truth. No matter where we go, God is already there, whether we know God, whether we recognise God, God is already there.

But, says Paul, God is known, he is known through Jesus Christ. When we look at Jesus we see God, we understand what God is like. Once we know that, there is no avoiding it – we have to, as Peter put it, be ready to give account of the hope that is within us. We know God through Jesus, through his life, through his death and through his resurrection, and once we know we are called to live the lives that reflect his love. ‘If you love me, says Jesus, you will obey my commands.’

There is always a depth, a mystery to God that is beyond our grasping, yet God is not far from anyone, believer or not, for He it is who keeps us all in existence. But God is known to us. When we look at Jesus, we understand what God is like.