

EASTER SUNDAY - To An Unknown God

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Date: 15 April 2001

Preacher: Paul Barker

- [0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on Easter Sunday the 15th of April 2001.
- The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled To an Unknown God and is from Acts chapter 17 verses 16 to 34.
- Let's pray that God helps us to understand what this Bible passage is about and something of what Easter is about and how we may worship God correctly.
- Heavenly Father we thank you that you speak to us, that you're a God who is known and knowable and we pray that you'll make yourself known to us now through your word.
- That we may not only understand it but worship you as our God and Saviour. And we pray this for Jesus' sake. Amen. A postcard from Athens 50 AD.
- [1 : 08] Dear friends, Athens I must say has seen better days but it's still worth a visit. What a glorious place it is. Exquisite statues to gods everywhere.
- They say and it's true that it's easier to find a God here than a man. There are magnificent temples, colonnades, wonderful arches, magnificent sports stadium.
- And the path and on on the Acropolis is majestic towering over the city. Having a good time, wish you were here, behave yourselves, love whoever it is.
- A postcard from Melbourne, Easter 2001 AD. Well this is a pleasant city. Some nice architecture here and there.
- A rather grand casino and magnificent sports stadium all over the place. The shopping precincts are particularly popular, especially on Sundays. Having a good time, wish you were here, behave yourselves.
- [2 : 16] At first sight, chalk and cheese. Athens 50 AD, Melbourne 2001 AD. Very different indeed. But take off the packaging, scratch below the surface and what do we find?
- St. Paul's writing from Athens or comment about Athens is hardly your average tourist's comment. He doesn't express amazement at the glorious buildings and architecture.
- But rather he sees an overt religiosity. Very religious people, he says. An abundance of statues and gods and temples.
- The gods abound. Take your pick. Have your favourite one. There are so many to choose from. Paul also understands the two general competing philosophies of his day.
- What were called the Epicureans and the Stoics. For the Epicureans, God was remote. Or the gods, Thor, were remote. Rather uninvolved in the world.
- [3 : 28] God had sort of always involved in some way in establishing things, but then like a watchkeeper wound it up and let it run and was watching from a distance. The Epicureans thought that life now is what matters, so eat and drink and be merry.
- They were indulgent sorts of people, rather sensual and sexual at times. They loved to escape pain. So freedom was from pain and the pursuit of pleasure and enjoyment and fun were part of their goals in life.

It was a hedonistic, even decadent, sort of society. For the Stoics, there was a high sense of moral duty. For them, pre-scientific rationalism, the importance of thought and thinking things through, was high on the agenda.

For them, God was part of everybody and everything. A sort of world soul or world force that permeated everything. What's called pantheism.

Their desire was for self-sufficiency. To be independent, the master of my soul. The captain of my fate. For them, as well as the Epicureans, there was the adoration of beauty.

[4 : 52] The love of life now. And on the opposite side of the globe, separated by two millennia and several oceans, what do we find?

We also find a pervasive hedonism, the pursuit of pleasure, the escape from pain. We also find the adoration of beauty.

Essentialism about our society. Indeed, an indulgence and extravagance in many places. For much of our society, like the ancient Stoics, the goal is self-sufficiency, a financial security and independence from people and other things.

Not least, God. For much of our society, like ancient Greece, God is remote. Maybe one who's wound up the watch and let it tick, but watch him safely from a distance.

And though perhaps we're not inundated with statues of metal or stone or wood in our midst, nonetheless, like ancient Greece, the gods are bound.

[6 : 02] They're everywhere. Take a pick. And if you don't like what's on offer, create your own. Of course, we like to think we're more sophisticated. We like to think that we've advanced several steps from ancient Athens and ancient Greece.

And we may not find lots of statues to gods in our homes and on our streets, but their equivalents are not difficult to find. Ancient Athens had some wonderful stone arches, but we have golden ones on every corner, it seems.

For us, there's plenty of pursuit of sexual and sensual desire. It's there on those towering billboards that overlook the city, our modern acropolises.

They advertise with sexual and sexual ways, chocolates and cars and shoes, amongst other things. And like ancient Greece, there is the adoration of beauty seen in every magazine and on every second television program.

The ubiquitous icons of our society are the gods of sports and entertainment. Our temples are flashing neon of consumerism and greed and indulgence.

[7 : 17] Our shopping cathedrals and our temples of casinos. And in the end, our little has changed. Our society is more and more like that of ancient Athens in Paul's day.

And just as St. Paul did not marvel at a theme in beauty and culture and sophistication, I suspect his response to us and our society today would be like his response then to Athens.

He was the stress. And the word that's used for his distress is a very strong word. He's churned up and angry about what he sees. It's a word that's reserved sometimes in the Old Testament for God and God's response to the idolatry of people and their worship of false gods.

And Paul says that's what is the case for him. He was deeply distressed, churned up and angry inside at what he saw about Athenian society and culture.

And so he debated with them about what's right in their ideology and religion and theology. And they started to listen.

[8 : 30] Some engaged with him in the marketplace, the ancient sort of Hyde Park corner, a place called the Areopagus, which technically is a hill that's just underneath the Acropolis of ancient Greece.

And probably there originally people would debate, the philosophers would probe and walk up and down, stroking their beards, wearing long white robes and so on. But probably down in the market area of Estoa would be where Paul would actually technically debate with these people.

And he preached to them about the unknown God. He says to them, Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.

For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, to an unknown God. And so Paul decides to preach to them about the God whom they think is unknown, but indeed is the God who is known and knowable.

And again, how much like our society that is. Because our society seems more and more to pride itself on having a God that is unknown and unknowable, as though that is the answer to our life and purpose.

[9 : 48] So Paul preaches, in essence, three things about this God. Firstly, he is the creator and sovereign of the universe.

He says to them, The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands.

How could he? If he is the God who made everything, how could he be limited to a little stone temple, whether it's a grand one or not? God is bigger than that.

And what's more, not only does he not live in shrines, nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything. In ancient Greek culture, the idea would be that you would feed the gods by offering some food at the altar and leave it there for them to eat, just like children would place some lemonade and a biscuit by the fireplace for Santa Claus on Christmas Eve and somehow be fooled into thinking that he eats it.

So the ancient Greeks would think that somehow they needed to offer things to God to sustain God and keep him alive. Paul says, how could that be? Because God is the creator of all, the one who sustains life, the one on whom we depend and not who depends upon us.

[11 : 08] So God does not need to be served by human hands since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. Moreover, Paul says, he is the ruler of the nations.

Now in ancient Greece, the nations were more or less sort of little city-states. Each would have their own sort of patron god, a fiend for the Athenians and so on.

But Paul is saying about the God that he's preaching about, that from one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they live.

This is not a God who's located in one city, in one temple on one city, as though he's the God of that little geographical location and there's a whole range of other gods for other places and cities and nations and states.

This God is the ruler of all nations. He's not a local deity. So Paul here is saying, unlike the ancient Greeks, that God is not a world soul that permeates all of the creation.

[12 : 17] He created it. It is different from him. God is the creator and everything else is created. There's a clear distinction between the two.

He's also saying that God is not the creation of human imagination, which in a polytheistic society like ancient Greece and one like our own, is the practice of many.

How often do you hear people say, if not say yourself, I like to think of God as being like this? That's creating God in our imagination. And Paul is saying God's not like that.

He created us. We don't create him. And he's saying that God's not local and limited. He's not one of many. But rather he's unique and he's sovereign over all.

Paul is refuting polytheism, the belief that there are many gods. And he's refuting pluralism, the belief that you can have one god, somebody else can have another, I can have another.

[13 : 20] They're all equally legitimate and valid. God is unique, sovereign over all. There is one, in effect, is what Paul is implying.

The second point he makes is that God is personal. For the ancient Greeks who believed that God was remote and far away and uninvolved in this earth, God is not personal, just remote.

Or if you are a stoic and believe that God was the sort of world force that permeated all parts of society, lived in each person and trees and animals and buildings, God again is not personal, just a sort of vague, nebulous world thought.

But Paul says that God's personal. And the reason that he's created this world and set its boundaries is so that people would search for God, perhaps even like a blind person in the dark, groping for him, maybe being able to find him, though indeed God is not far from each one of us.

He goes on then to say that in God we live and move and have our being. As even some of your own Greek poets have said, for we too are his offspring.

[14 : 37] Since we're God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. That is, God is personal and we are made in his image.

We're produced by him. That's what he means by saying, we're God's offspring. That is, we human beings, by being personal beings, reflect something of what God is like.

He's a personal God and we are created for a relationship, a personal relationship with God. He can't be represented by a stone statue or a metal statue.

That's impersonal and inanimate, lifeless. But God is full of life and personal to relate to us. In effect, what Paul is implying in these words is that human life has much more value than Greek philosophy, I would use it.

Human life is much more valuable than just these 70 years or whatever we live on this earth. Human life is valued more highly by the Christian faith than any other faith.

[15 : 47] Because humans are made in the image of God. We are God's offspring. The third point that Paul makes, he said that God is sovereign, he has said that God is personal, and the third point is with a sting in the tail.

God, he says, is judge of all. And this is the crunch. This is the bit that hammers home what Paul is trying to say to these Athenians.

He has said that the Athenians are ignorant people. Ignorant because they've got a statue or an altar to an unknown God. So by actually having an inscription to an unknown God, they are saying we are ignorant about this God.

It's the Athenians' own confession. Paul says, you say yourselves that you're ignorant. Ignorance though is not morally neutral. Ignorance is not excusable.

God will judge all people for their knowledge of him. Now Paul says in times past, in history, God has overlooked such ignorance.

[16 : 55] That is his reserve judgment. He's sat back and he's let people continue in their ignorance of him. So he says, while God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he changes.

Now, Paul says, comes a time when God will stop overlooking human ignorance. Now, he says, God commands all people everywhere to repent.

To turn away from their ignorance of God. To say sorry to God that we haven't known you. And to begin to know God. And the reason Paul says that it's now time to repent is because God has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed.

God has fixed a day to judge this world and each person in us who's ever lived. Moreover, God will judge the world in righteousness. Something that will be fair and truthful.

And he's appointed a person to be the judge. A man whom he has appointed will judge on the day that God has appointed all this world and all who've ever lived in it.

[18 : 16] Now, there are lots of religions in ancient Greece and the same in our society today. There are lots of worldviews and ideologies and philosophies and theologies. There are lots of systems of thought.

And by and large, our society encourages us to say, it's okay if you say that, I say this, that's fine. Take your pick. Where our society gets upset is when one claims to be right for all.

And that others are wrong. And that's what St. Paul is claiming here. By saying that God is sovereign and personal and the judge of all, he is saying that the Christian God is the only God that has any validity or truth about him at all and all the others are absolute nonsense and a waste of time.

They're not politically correct words. They're the words that stir up people in our society today as well. Society is basically happy.

We can choose to worship whomever we want to worship. Take your pick. Even worship a few. Have an each way bet. That's how many people regard the church and Christian faith. They live their lives practicing some sort of idolatry or worship.

[19 : 31] But just periodically, they might poke their head in to worship God just in case. But Paul is saying it's not good enough. There is only one God and he demands our soul worship and allegiance because one day he will judge us and he will hold us accountable for whom we know and what we know about him.

Now what makes Paul so sure about this? After all, his could just be some human imagination creation of philosophy or theology about God. Why does Paul speak this way?

Because Jesus is risen from the dead. God, he says, has given us assurance of all of this by raising this person, this man whom he's appointed to be judged, by raising him from the dead.

That's why Christianity is true. That's why it's true for all. Because Jesus is alive. It's not an optional truth. So that some people can choose to be Christians but I always say, well yes, Jesus might have risen but I'm not going to be a Christian.

I'll practice my own life. I'll worship my own things. I'll devote my attention to what I want to devote to. Because Jesus is risen, Paul says, Christianity is the truth and all other religions and worldviews are wrong in the end.

[20 : 53] It's a very exclusive statement. Paul is saying, because Jesus rose from the dead, that is the proof that God will judge us by this man who's risen from the dead.

We cannot escape God. We cannot avoid him. We will be held accountable for our knowledge of God on the day when Jesus returns to judge.

And the resurrection of Jesus is the proof that that will happen and be the case. So we can't afford to ignore it. We can't afford to be placing each way bets on different religions and worldviews and ideologies.

We can't afford to be inconsistent with who we worship on a Sunday compared to the worship that we practice on Monday through to Saturday. If this is true as Paul says, then we must place all our Easter eggs in one basket and worship this God and this Jesus who is risen from the dead.

This is why we must shun idolatry. Why we must shun pluralism. Why we must accept that the Christian faith is unique and alone the truth that gives purpose and meaning to this life and life eternal and this universe.

[22 : 12] And it is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead that guarantees its truth. No other system, no other worldview, no other religion, no other philosophy, no other ideology, no other theology, no other system of thought has any such claim as the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

In the end, most of the others are creations of human imagination. They're appealing. They've got attractive things. They look peaceful or calm. They offer some inner peace, some way of thinking about our world.

Some of them practice some nice morals and ethics. But in the end, they're all baseless. Apart from the Christian faith, because Jesus rose from the dead.

The resurrection of Jesus is the proof that we need that God is knowable. He's not remote. He's not an impersonal world force. God has acted decisively, intervening in history by raising Jesus from the dead as proof for all of us to see that we can know God.

He's declared His hand. What Jesus said about God and Himself is true. It's testified by God raising Him from the dead. We cannot escape that truth. And God calls us to know Him through Jesus.

[23 : 32] The resurrection is proof that God is God, sovereign of all. The resurrection of Jesus is for all people, for all time, in all places. And the resurrection is proof that Jesus will judge and that we cannot escape this God.

Whatever God we choose to worship in this life now, it is the God of the Bible whom Paul is preaching whom we will face on that final day.

We cannot avoid Him and He will not continue to overlook our ignorance of Him. On that day, He will ask us if we have known Him.

And if we know Jesus, we have known Him. God is not unknown. God is not unknowable. And though He's bigger than our human imagination and thought can ever quite grasp, He's revealed sufficient of Himself in Jesus Christ and His death and resurrection for us to know God and have confidence that He holds the meaning of this life and this universe and that we, through Jesus Christ, have forgiveness of sins and the guarantee, the sure and certain guarantee of everlasting life.

Our lives are worth much, much more than the pagan Stoics thought, than the Epicureans practice, that the people of our society who are post-modern pluralists think.

[25 : 03] Our lives are worth more than that. They're worth more than that, we know, because God raised Jesus from the dead. Hallelujah.

Hallelujah.