

“Is God unknown?”

Sermon - Gregor Henderson

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Acts 17:22-34, John 14:15-21

Is God unknown - or even unknowable? The 1st century citizens of Athens were obviously a careful lot. Their altar dedicated “to an unknown God” was a fine piece of insurance, a cunning plan to keep in good with whatever god or gods they were unintentionally ignoring.

Paul’s speech to the Athenians given to us in Acts chapter 17 is an extraordinary piece of oratory. Unlike speeches given by Peter or Stephen or Paul to Jewish or Gentile audiences in Jerusalem or Caesarea or Antioch or Thessalonica or Ephesus, in this speech in Athens there’s only one oblique reference to Jesus as “a man whom God has appointed...and raised from the dead” - Jesus is never even named - and there are no references whatsoever to the Hebrew Scriptures, no quotes from the prophets or psalms or the law. Paul is in Athens, the centre of Greek culture and learning and philosophy, so he addresses them in a more general philosophical manner rather than presuming any knowledge of the Jewish faith, let alone any knowledge of Jesus.

So Paul refers to the God of creation, the Lord of heaven and earth, and notes how all peoples have an innate desire to “search for God” and to find God. Then, with breathtaking boldness Paul quotes from two ancient Greek poets whose writings referred to Zeus, the father or king of the gods in the Greek pantheon of gods, and applies those writings to the one true “unknown” God, the God of righteousness and judgment and resurrection.

The quote “in him we live and move and have our being” comes from the Greek 6th century BC poet and philosopher Epimenides, who took issue with the people of Crete in his time who believed that Zeus had died. Shades of the old ‘God is dead’ controversy! He wrote:

“They fashioned a tomb for thee, O holy and high one—
The Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies!
But thou art not dead: thou livest and abidest forever,
For in thee we live and move and have our being.”

The quote “for we too are his offspring” comes from the Greek 3rd century BC poet and philosopher Aratus, very popular throughout the Roman empire in New Testament times, whose epic poem about the stars and the universe begins with this:

“Let us begin with Zeus, whom we mortals never leave unspoken.
For every street, every market-place is full of Zeus.
Even the sea and the harbour are full of this deity.
Everywhere everyone is indebted to Zeus.
For we are indeed his offspring.”

Paul’s use of these Greek writers says something about respect for people of other faiths, while also observing the time-honoured practice of stealing the best lines of others!

The concepts and themes in Paul’s speech provide an interesting template for debate with non-believers in the world today. First, the life and beauty and fruitfulness of creation have always drawn people to realise there must be a Creator behind it. Second, the fact that every human culture includes religious belief and searching is evidence of God reaching out to us and of our being made in God’s image. Third, the reference in Paul’s speech that God is no image, is not gold or silver or stone, but is real, is again an important argument about the existence and nature of God. And fourth, the conclusion of calling people to repentance, to turn towards the God of righteousness, judgment and resurrection, is a fine closing appeal.

But two other themes in Paul’s speech resonate with me even more. One is the conviction that “from one ancestor God made all nations to inhabit the whole earth”. This jells neatly with the creation stories in Genesis, with modern scientific anthropology and with our evolutionary understanding of a common ancestor from ancient Africa, and it also, of course, supports our understandings in favour of cultural diversity and against any form of racism.

The other is the statement in Paul's speech that "indeed God is not far from each one of us". God may be unknown to people, but that is not because God wants to remain hidden, unseen, unknown. God is known to us in Jesus - Jesus is the one who shows us God, who shows us that God is love, compassion, understanding, forgiveness, solidarity, fellowship, wisdom, that God is with us. Did you hear Jesus' promise in our gospel reading today "I will not leave you orphaned"? - even though Jesus is no longer physically on earth, he is here with us, in the gift of the Holy Spirit, God with us in truth, in wise counsel, in advocacy, who abides with us wherever we are. As we turn ourselves to him - the literal meaning of repentance - so God makes himself known to us.

So God is not unknown. There is only one God, the God known to us in Jesus, the God with us in the Holy Spirit, the God of the whole of humanity, the God who indeed is not far from each one of us.

I've chosen hymn 153 to follow this sermon today. I marvel at this hymn. Timothy Rees, who went on to become a bishop of the Church of Wales, wrote this hymn in 1921. Not long before he'd spent 4 years as an army chaplain in the Great War - what horrors he must have seen, what outrageous suffering, what grim tragedy. Yet two or three years after that dreadful experience he writes these three verses, praising the God of love whose love is seen in creation, whose love enfolds every human being, whose love will triumph and reign.

This is our so-called unknown God. We know God, through Jesus and through our own experience of God, we know God loves us, we love God. It's an extraordinary speech from Paul in Athens. It's an extraordinary hymn from Timothy in Wales. God is extraordinarily near to us, here in Canberra, and everywhere.

To the glory of God. Amen.

Hymn 153

God is love, let heav'n adore him;
God is love, let earth rejoice;
Let creation sing before him,
and exalt him with one voice.
God, who laid the earth's foundation,
he who spread the heavens above,
and who breathes through all creation
God is love, eternal love.

God is love, and gently enfolding
all the world in one embrace,
with unfailing grasp is holding
every child of every race.
And when human hearts are breaking
under sorrow's iron rod,
then they find that selfsame aching
deep within the heart of God.

God is love, and though with blindness
sin afflicts our human hearts,
God's eternal lovingkindness
holding, guiding, grace imparts.
Sin and death and hell shall never
o'er us final triumph gain;
God is love, so love for ever
o'er the universe must reign.