

"Proclaiming the Unknown God"

Acts 17:22-31

May 21, 2017

Dear Friends in Christ,

Morality, Religion, and Christianity. Have you ever thought about the difference between morality, religion, and Christianity? It's quite interesting. We may be tempted to think that only Christians are moral. However, a person can be quite moral without being a Christian. On the other hand, a person can be quite religious without being moral or a Christian. The Christian, however, is religious and, as a fruit of faith, desires and strives to live a moral life. We'll come back to these distinctions a little later.

But for now, let us look at St. Paul. The Apostle Paul was engaged on his 2nd missionary journey. He had been proclaiming Christ Crucified and Risen in Thessalonica and Berea. As a result, he had been driven from Berea to Athens by persecution, and was waiting for Timothy and Silas to rejoin him. This, while not a part of his missionary plan, was part of God's plan. Characteristically, Paul made the most of the opportunity. Now he was presenting Christianity to the leading philosophers of the city of Athens -- the native city of Socrates and Plato, and the adopted city of Aristotle, Epicurus, and Zeno. This was a strategic event for the spread of the Gospel among the Gentiles.

As he entered Athens, Paul couldn't contain himself as he beheld that the city was full of idols. Immediately Paul begins to proclaim that Jesus is the Christ -- and with that truth, the events of the Incarnation, the Atonement, the Resurrection, and the Atonement. He does so in the synagogue where Jews and others were worshipping. This carried out into the market place. Soon there were philosophers who were debating with him. Let's follow Paul as he encounters moral and religious men who were without eternal life and salvation. We do so under the theme, Proclaiming the Unknown God, and we use Acts 17:22-31 as our text.

Acts 17 -- So Paul, standing in the middle of the Are-op'agus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything. And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each one of us, for 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your poets have said, 'For we are indeed his offspring.' Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead."

This is the Word of the LORD our God.

The Areopagus is a 370 foot high hill in Athens. The name is classical Greek for "hill of Ares." In Greek mythology, Ares (or Mars in Latin) was the god of war, bloodshed, strife, and pestilence -- the son of Zeus. Those assembled men of Athens made up a large audience for Paul to share the Gospel. The assembly included the Epicureans (who did not believe in God, but that the world was created by a fortunate collision of atoms) and the Stoics (who believed that the gods were everywhere and controlled all our actions). Both groups were intellectuals who studied philosophy and engaged in academic debate.

So, Paul, standing in the middle of the Are-op'agus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious." All around Paul were statues, temples, shrines, and altars filling the public places and the city generally. From Zeus and Athene down to stones and artist images, they all had their devotees, and there were divinities and shrines in every house. The heathen festivals were celebrated in grand style; all these temples had their priests or priestesses. There were public and private functions accompanied by sacrifices and by rites. Is it any wonder that Paul said, Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious?

If the apostle were to travel around our country today, visiting public places, examining our society and culture, looking at our artifacts, coming into homes he would probably make the same announcement, "People of Canada, and especially you people of Alberta, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. At civic events and before the graduations you have invoked God, singing "God, keep our land...". From the crack houses in the dark corners of your cities to the lighted temples of death pinnacled by the trumpeted angel -- from LSD to LDS, I perceive that you are very religious. You worship money, wear images of saints, and congregate for hours around a central box known as a television. You have constructed buildings where rituals, rites, and sacrifices take place. Bookstores have works from transcendental meditation to new age spiritualism. You throw salt over your shoulder and will not walk under a ladder. With your mouths you use the name of God to damn things and even people. Indeed, I perceive that in every way you are very religious."

But remember, being religious does not necessarily mean that one has eternal life or is saved. If that were the situation, then Paul would never have had to continue with his address to the Athenians, and you would not need to hear anything from this pulpit. If that were so, then all we would need to hear from someone would be, "Don't worry about me, I believe in a god." Regardless of how **much** a person might believe, or how **religious** a person might be, **where** faith is focused is immensely and eternally important. That is why Paul did not stop when he perceived that the men of Athens were very religious. He continued, For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To an unknown god'.

The Athenians had constructed an altar to an unknown god. Perhaps for some this was a way to cover all the bases -- not wanting to offend one of the gods by neglecting to acknowledge him or her. In other words, like a spiritual insurance policy. It is also possible that, for some, it was constructed to this god of whom they had heard a bit, but they did not know his name, his power, or his work, as they knew of their many other deities. Paul intended to consider this altar and its inscription only as a confession on the part of the Athenians that, despite their many gods, one God existed who, although they knew **about** Him, they did not, in any way, **know** Him. It is as Jesus said "If you love Me, keep My commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, Whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him."

With what Paul continues, may at first, seem strange. He does not appeal to the Scriptures. That is quite appropriate in this case. In dealing with pagans, an appeal to the Scriptures would be useless, so Paul appeals to the Almighty God and His creative work when he says:

“The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything. And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each one of us, for ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your poets have said, ‘For we are indeed his offspring.’ Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of man.”

Paul presents God, the omnipotent Creator and Ruler, Who is absolute and sufficient in Himself. He lays special stress on man’s relation to God, who as His creature is altogether dependent on Him and His gifts -- who is intended to worship God. Then Paul continues to deal with the topic of the patience, the expectations, and the plans that this true God has -- past patience, present expectations, future action.

“The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead.”

God’s patience with man’s folly will end. In the past, in order to wait for the fullness of time when the Christ would come, God did not render judgment on sin. Or, as the epistle reading declared, God waited patiently in the days of Noah. In the present He calls for repentance. Like John the Baptist, Jesus also looks for fruit that befits repentance. Today’s Gospel says it: “Whoever has My commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves Me.” In the future, He has set a day of judgment. The Bible is clear that the day of reckoning will come -- the righteous Judge will arrive. The psalm appointed for this Sunday, Psalm 66, prophesies of this truth when it says: “For He comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity.”

Paul told his listeners that this judgment will take place and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising a Man from the dead. That is when they stopped listening to Paul -- this was the stumbling block -- the Resurrection of Jesus. There was mocking and stalling, ridicule and rejection. But this was the Unknown God Whom Paul was called to proclaim. This is the One that the Church is to announce is LORD and God. This is the One Paul wanted to tell them about, but it didn’t happen.

The hardness of their hearts and the stubbornness of their wills kept Paul from telling them that this LORD desires so much to be their God that He came to give His Life on the cross for them -- that He graciously announces, “Because I live, you also will live.” This LORD says to you, “I have loved you with an everlasting love. I have given you My Word which is able to make you wise unto salvation and to comfort you in times of tragedy -- My Promise that gives you hope when all earthly hope disappears -- My Good News to you that I have redeemed you, I have called you by Name and that you are Mine.”

From centuries ago to the present, the Church has been entrusted with the Gospel -- on which the congregation is nurtured as you are this morning -- this Good News which the people of God are to daily witness to those, like the men of Athens, who have never heard of the unknown God. Let us pray

that we may never tire nor grow weary of proclaiming the Unknown God! In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.