

1. Can we know the unknown God? : He wants to know us, so we can't ignore him

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] Now our new series starting today and for the next Wednesdays in November is called Can We Know the Unknown God?

And we're going to turn in our Bibles to page 926 and to Acts 17. This is the record of how Paul and his friends are travelling through Greece.

The Gospel has come to Europe through the Roman colony of Philippi and Paul and his friends have been travelling south. And Paul is now in the great city of Athens waiting for his companions Silas and Timothy to join him.

And that's the them mentioned in verse 16 where we begin reading. We're going to read Acts 17 verses 16 to 34 while Paul waits in Athens for his friends.

Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.

[1 : 06] So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him and some said, What does this babbler wish to say?

Others said he seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And they took hold of him and brought him to the Areopagus saying, May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?

Will you bring some strange things to our ears? We wish to know therefore what these things mean. Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus 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 the 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 temples made by man, Nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything, Since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

[2 : 35] And he made from one man every nation of mankind To live on all the face of the earth, Having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, That they should seek God in the hope that they might feel their way towards him and find him.

Yet he is actually not far from each of us, For in him we live and move and have our being, Or even as some of your own poets have said, For we indeed are his offspring.

Being then God's offspring, We ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, An image formed by the art and imagination of man.

The times of ignorance God overlooked, But now he commands all people everywhere to repent, Because he has fixed the 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, By erasing him from the dead.

Now, when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, Some mocked, But others said, We will hear you again about this. So Paul went out from their midst, And some men joined him and believed, Among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite, And a woman named Demerus, And others with them.

[4 : 03] Amen. This is the word of the Lord, And may he bless it to our hearts and minds. Can we know the unknown God? God.

That's our subject for the four weeks, And our particular subject today is, He wants to know us, So we can't ignore him. Cities, in many ways, are disappointing places, Particularly if you arrive at a station or an airport.

When I was in Rome a few weeks ago, When we were driven out of the airport by the taxi, The first thing we saw was a pizza hut, And then a McDonald's. And that happens almost everywhere, Throughout the developed world.

But of course, When you get into the historic parts, And see the glorious buildings, And the remains lasting through the centuries, It's quite a different thing. And cities have their fascination.

Even for someone like me, Who prefers small towns like Durham and Stratford, Or St Andrews, Cities are fascinating places. And few were more fascinating than Athens, This city of Athens.

[5 : 11] Now by the time Paul went there, The city was probably living on past glories. Many a city does that, And I'm not going to offend anybody here, By mentioning some, Because I'm pretty certain I'll offend somebody, So I'll leave you to apply that yourself.

This city was probably living on its past glories. Hundreds of years before, It had been filled with great philosophers, Great architects, Great poets and dramatists, Names like Plato, Socrates and Aristotle, Had all been there, Had all lived there, And worked there.

It was a place of great buildings, There was the Parthenon, That splendid building, Which dominated and almost defined Athens. And there was a huge gold and silver statue, Of the patron goddess of the city, Athena, Which was visible 40 miles away.

In other words, It was a tourist trap. But Paul isn't interested in any of that. If you look at verse 16, His spirit was provoked within him, As he saw that the city was full of idols.

But it was a fascinating place, As cities are today. There's a vibrancy, There's a buzz in a big city. Anytime I visit London, And I always sense that. The sense that this is the, This is a place where so many ideas flow from.

[6 : 30] Concentrations of power, Of political power, Of intellectual power, Of fashion, Of ideas. And so the gospel comes to Athens, As it comes to us today, In the heart of another great city, This city of Glasgow.

So that's the significance of Athens. The gospel coming to us, As it came to the city in the past. But the other thing to notice, Is verse 19, They brought him to the Areopagus.

The Areopagus, Or Mars Hill, Was a place of discussion, And debate. Nowadays, It would correspond to something, Like a TV studio, Where people sit and debate, And discuss together.

Or like the kind of debates, That happen in universities. The kind of commerce of ideas, Either atheistic ideas, From Richard Dawkins, Or godly ideas, From Christian writers.

Kind of thing, C.S. Lewis did so brilliantly, For an earlier generation. Bringing the, Bringing the gospel, In all kinds of ways. So that's the, The background, That's the setting.

[7 : 33] And this, This afternoon, I just want to give a brief introduction, To the passage as a whole, And then develop it, In the next three weeks. Can we know, The unknown god?

I'm going to suggest, That Paul suggests, Two ways, In which this can be done. There is a wrong way, And there is a right way. Let's begin with the wrong way.

It would be nonsense, To say the Athenians, Weren't interested in god, Or the gods. They were fascinated by religion. Indeed, One writer said, It was easier to find a god, Than a man in Athens.

So, So dedicated, Was it to religion? But in particular, The Athenians, Tried to find god, In a number of wrong ways.

Look at verse 16. He saw that the city, Was full of idols. Firstly, They tried to find god, Was by idolatry. Literally, Under idols.

[8 : 30] That's what the text, Literally says. We might say something like, Swamped with idols. Everywhere you went, In every street corner, In every nook and cranny, In every niche, In every building, There were idols.

Idols to, Every god you could give a name to, And in particular, In case they had missed anybody out, This altar, Which Paul fastens on, To the unknown god, Just hedging their bets.

In case we've forgotten anyone, In this huge number of gods, Here's another one. All these gods, Had one thing in common. They were human inventions.

In other words, They were less, Than the Athenians themselves. In some ways, That's very convenient. If you have a god, Who can't hear, That's great, If we're telling lies, Or gossiping.

Then our god, Can't do anything about it. Not so good, If we want to pray, To this god. A god who can't hear, What's the point of praying, To him or her?

[9 : 30] A god who can't speak, That's great, If we're doing something, We know to be wrong, And we don't want rebuked. What if we want that god, To reveal himself to us, Or herself to us?

That's not much good either, Is it? Not one of those gods, Could hear, Not one of those gods, Could speak. And certainly not one of them, Could do, What Paul had found, At the beginning of his, Christian journey.

Not one of them, Could say, I am Jesus, I am the saviour, I am the lord. They were, False gods. And surely our world, Is full of false gods, False god of commercialism, From our television sets, From the internet, From glossy brochures, Is beamed the message, To be successful, To live a good life, Is to be wealthy, To be successful.

And of course, If we're not wealthy, Then we, Then we are seduced, Into credit, Aren't we? To credit cards, Which offer us, Instant wealth, Instant success.

That surely is an idolatry. Go to borders, Go to waterstones, Look at the mind, Body and spirit section, You'll find a multitude, Of idols there. Really harmless things, Like aromatherapy, We do end up in nasty, And sinister things, Like reading tarot cards, Like divination, And so on.

[10 : 59] He was grieved, He was provoked, When he saw that the city, Was full of idols. Glasgow is full of idols, Isn't it? Glasgow, Like ancient Athens, Is full of idols.

But also, It was full of intellectualism. This was another way, Verse 18, The epicurean, And stoic philosophers, Very briefly, And sketchily, And probably badly, The epicureans, Believed in the gods, But they believed, That they were, Remote and distant, And took nothing to do, With human affairs. They were untouchable, The world was governed, By chance. Now if the world, Is governed by chance, There's going to be, No judgment, Is there? The epicureans, Weren't saying, God has fixed a day, On which he will judge, The world in righteousness.

That's why, Epicureanism, Has come to be, Identified with, Eat, Drink and be merry, For tomorrow we die. If the gods don't care, If they're not going to, Bring us into judgment, Then we're just as well, To enjoy ourselves, Aren't we?

Because we're dead, A long time. That was a kind of, Epicurean philosophy. The stoics, Essentially, Were pantheists, In other words, They believed that, God was just simply, Simply diffused, Throughout the universe.

[12 : 13] A kind of, Big kind of, Mystical experience. They were fatalists, They believed in endurance. The kind of, British stiff upper lip. Many people think, Is Christian, But he's not, You know, It's stoic.

When we show, The stiff British upper lip, We're showing stoicism, Rather than Christianity. Reason, Was supreme. And you were never, To become too involved, With anything, Or anyone. Now, That was the kind, Of intellectual ideas, That were driving, Ancient Athens. Now, When you think of it, That produces a society, That is indifferent. A society, That doesn't care.

A society, Where you enjoy yourself, If you can, And you're indifferent, To the needs of others. And hasn't that happened, So much, In our contemporary world. The gap, Between rich and poor, Is ever widening.

The fantastic salaries, That some earn, Earn in a week, Which others, Can scarcely earn, In a year, And all the rest of it. It's the, The kind of society, Where our God, Has become ourselves.

[13 : 20] Reason is supreme. In our own day, Of course, Richard Dawkins, And others, Who say there is no God, Or else the practical atheism, Says, Well, God does exist.

He's nothing to do with us. Now, Intellectual endeavour, Is a good thing. Schools, Universities, And colleges, Are very, Very good things. But they will not, Lead us to God, On our own.

It's very easy, Particularly, If in a nice, In a nice, Respectable part, Of the world. You've gone to a good school, And so on. To believe, That what we need, Is education, Education, Education.

We do need education. But, What we really need, Is transformation. Education, Education will never, Take away our sin. Education, Education will never, In itself, Lead us to God.

Education will never, Make us kind. Education will never, Make us humble. We need,

Transformation. So there was, Idolatry, There was intellectualism, And the other way, In which they, Spent their time, Verse 21, Is, Now all the Athenians, And the foreigners, Who lived there, Would spend their time, In nothing, Except telling, Or hearing, Something new.

[14 : 35] The search, For novelty. And this, Of course, Is why they were, Initially interested, In what Paul said. They never heard this before, So they were interested, In it.

Now our culture, Is very much, A culture devoted, To novelty, Isn't it? Going to Marks, And Spencers, Look at how many, Of the recipes, Are called new.

Now of course, They're not telling lies, They probably put, An extra ingredient, In it, Or mixed, Or missed an ingredient, Out. But our culture, Has got what's been called, Inbuilt obsolescence.

You hardly buy anything, But it's out of date. I love, I love Nissan cars. I've driven Nissan, Since they were Datsuns. I'll tell you, How long ago that was.

Some of you are too young, To remember that. But, And I always feel, If the Japanese, Could make car bodies, As good as they make, The car engines, Then no one would ever, Buy another car.

[15 : 31] But of course, They don't want that, Do they? Car manufacturers, Don't want you, To buy a car, And then keep it. They want you, To buy another car, And another car, And another car.

Swift, And look at the swift, Change of public opinion, See it in politics.

Gordon Brown's wonderful, And he goes down, In the opinion polls, And all the rest, I'm not making, A political point, I'm simply saying, The opinion polls, Are so volatile, Fashions change, So radically.

Once again, Novelty, Is not a bad thing. There is nothing wrong, With exploring new ideas, New products, And so on. But it will not, Lead us to God.

It will not, Lead us to godliness. It will not, Answer the big questions, Big questions, About salvation, About sin, About evil, And suffering.

So that's the wrong way, The wrong way to God, Which is, Was practiced, In ancient Athens, By getting tongue tied here, Ancient Athens, And is also practiced, In contemporary Glasgow.

[16 : 34] Now, More briefly, The right way. That's not because, The right way is less important, Than the wrong way, But because that's what, We're going to be exploring, Over the next three weeks. So just a brief, Introduction to it.

The right way, The gospel, Did not seem, As if it were the right way. Look at verse 19, What does this, Babblers, Wish to say?

Now that does not sound, To me like a compliment. If that were to be said, To me at the beginning, Of a Cornhill class, I would not feel, The students were complimenting me.

And, The word, The word in Greek, Is even less complimentary. The word suggests, A bird, Pecking around, In a rubbish heap, To try and pick up, Little scraps.

Paul must have been, Rather overawed. He was talking, To the good and the great, These philosophers, Who probably, Were, Probably had a very good conceit, Of themselves.

[17 : 33] This Jew, Coming to instruct, The Athenians. And what does he say? He goes straight, For the jugular. He says, You're getting it wrong. Verse 23, I found an altar, With this inscription, To the unknown God.

Well actually, Paul says, I know, Who that God is. I'm going to tell you, About him. Notice verse 27, He is actually, Not far, From each one of us.

You think, You're looking for God. You think, Your idolatry, Your philosophy, Your search for novelty, Is a search for God. Let me tell you, Says Paul, God wants you, Far more, Than you want him.

Many of us, Don't search for God, Very seriously. We dabble around, With it. But God, Is anxious, To know us. Just two things. He has given us, A word to proclaim.

Verse 23, What you worship, As unknown, I proclaim to you. We have a gospel, To proclaim. So we can't ignore him.

[18 : 37] And so, Paul shares the gospel. And we'll be exploring that, In the next few weeks. Since he's speaking in Athens, He doesn't quote the Old Testament, As he does to Jewish audiences. All we've got here, Is the whole plot line, The whole story line, Of the Old Testament, Beginning with creation.

God, He says, Cannot be put in a box. He's not an idol. You cannot put him, In the box of intellectualism. You can't explain him away. And he's not just, The latest fad.

But the other thing, He says, Is this God, Has a name. He's not unknown. He actually has a name. Verse 18, The last part. He was preaching, Jesus, And the resurrection.

They probably heard him, Actually, As preaching to gods, A male and female gods. One called Jesus, One called Anastasis, When they probably saw it, His female concert. Which means resurrection.

But this is the very heart, Of the message. And Paul's going to, Is going to tell the Athenians that, And we're going to come to that, In due course. Because Jesus, Is no fantasy.

[19 : 42] Jesus is no idol. Jesus, Verse 30, Is the man, One whom God has appointed, And given assurance of this, By raising him from the dead. Paul, In other words, Is not coming with a new philosophy, A new intellectual experience, A new, A new kind of theory, Which will, Give a new, Way of looking at things.

Paul is sharing, Certain events, That happened in time and space, And other events, Which are yet to happen. Events, Which will transform everything. So as we finish, Paul is saying to the Athenians, And Paul is saying to us, God wants to know you.

Do you want to know him? That is the question. Let's pray. Amen. And God our Father, How we thank you, You have not left us, To find you by our own devices, By our cleverness, Or by our, Or by our inventions.

You have revealed yourself to us, In Jesus Christ. And you have given to us, The written word, Which fully and faithfully points to him. Bless us now, As we return to our business, And may we go in the knowledge, That that God is not, Unknown, That God loves us, That God has revealed himself to us.

We ask this, In Jesus name. Amen.