

Exploring the Unknown

Readings: Acts 17:22-31 & John 14:15-21

Intro

How many of you here are philosophers? Well, in some ways all of us are at some time. Every time we struggle to make sense of life, or ask what am I here for, what's it all about or what do I want to aim for in life then we are asking philosophical questions - and we haven't even begun to try and fit God into the equation!

Our theme today is Exploring the Unknown – searching for answers to the big questions of life and there is plenty of that in the reading from Acts that we are going to look at today. First of all we will look at Paul's experiences in Athens in Acts 17 and then see what we can learn from it, and from Paul's example, as we try to live as followers of Jesus in today's society.

Background

Let's look at Acts first of all and Luke's account of Paul in Athens.

The Greeks were really good at thinking about the big questions of life, especially in Athens. Some of the great Greek philosophers had lived there, people like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Their great golden age was long past but the Athenians still prided themselves on their openness to new ideas and were only too willing to get into elegant debates with one another.

Into this scene comes Paul. – Now Paul was trained in debating techniques but he was also passionate about preaching the gospel and introducing people to Jesus; Jesus the Messiah, the one sent by God to free us from our sins and to restore our relationship with him. Paul writes to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 5:19) – “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them.”

Paul had already been preaching this message in the other towns he had visited, and so far he had been stripped, beaten and thrown in prison in Philippi; he had caused a riot in Thessalonica and had to flee under cover of darkness to Berea; and then, when trouble seemed to be brewing there as well, Paul was quietly escorted to Athens to wait for his friends, Silas and Timothy.

But Paul can't keep quiet and it doesn't seem to have taken him long to get talking and debating with people in the main city square. Luke mentions two groups in particular: the Epicureans and the Stoics.

This isn't a study of Greek philosophy but I think that if we look at what they believed we will find that people are not so very different today. The Epicureans believed that the gods, if they existed at all, were distant and remote and not interested in what went on in the world. The gods didn't live in temples and they certainly didn't need sacrifices or anything that humans could offer them. The Epicureans were basically materialists who thought that this life is all there is so you should aim to get as much pleasure out of it as you could – [nb. Not so much sensual pleasure or self-fulfilment but pleasure in the sense of a simple and quiet life in the company of family and friends.] Some of the people I know would probably have a similar attitude to life – you only live once so make the most of it; you could call it the bucket-list approach to life.

The Stoics on the other hand were pantheists who believed that god was in everything and that everything that happened was the will of god. It must be accepted without resentment. What is, is. The best you can do is to be staunch in the face of adversity, to make good life choices and to try to live a virtuous life. Again, I think there are many people today who try to live that way.

But as well as debating with the philosophers, Paul was amazed and troubled by all the temples, shrines and idols that he saw as he was wandering around. The people as a whole were very religious, and it has been said that there were more statues of the gods in Athens than in all the rest of Greece put together. And of course, dominating the city was the Acropolis with the Parthenon, the temple of Athena at its summit.

But one shrine in particular caught Paul's eye - the altar to an unknown god. To understand what happens next we need to have a bit of a back-story. Six hundred years before Paul arrived in Athens there was an outbreak of the plague and none of their prayers and sacrifices to the gods had been able to stop it. In desperation the Athenians asked the advice of a guy from Crete called Epimenides. He told them 1. There must be another god whose name you don't know. 2. They needed to assume that this god was great enough and good enough to stop the plague if they asked for his help. 3. That this god is probably also great enough and good enough to smile upon them in their ignorance if they acknowledge their ignorance and call upon him.

Epimenides suggested that the Athenians bring a flock of sheep to Mars Hill and keep them penned up all night so that they couldn't graze. Then, the next morning they were to release the sheep and Epimenides would pray to the god and promise that when any sheep lay down instead of grazing an altar would be built there dedicated to the unknown god and the sheep would be sacrificed on it. That is what they did and the city was freed of the plague. [I don't have time to develop it here but some of you might like to think about the implications of a great and good God acting in mercy to deliver ignorant people by means of sheep who lay down and were sacrificed.] This story passed into a legend of deliverance that Paul was able to make use of when, 600 years later, he stood up before the meeting of the Areopagus.

The Areopagus was a sort of council in charge of regulating the life of the city, particularly anything affecting public morality. Paul's preaching about Jesus and the resurrection had sparked a lot of interest and they wanted to know more about this new teaching (v19) and the 'strange' or unknown things (v20) he was talking about. What an opportunity – wouldn't it be great if people today were as interested in what we have to say as Christians.

But how does Paul go about speaking to a crowd like this?

Paul's sermon

Firstly Paul begins with the positives and he commends them for being religious, for taking an interest in spiritual things. He also makes an effort to connect with where they are at; he picks up on some of their ways of thinking and quotes from writers familiar to them. But, Paul is also prepared to present ideas that challenge their presuppositions. He is gracious but honest.

Do you remember what Peter wrote: “Always be ready to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” (1 Peter 3:15)

Look at how Paul approaches this. He links what he has to say to the well-known story from their past that they can all relate to – the legend of the unknown god. Paul has to tell them that they are living in ignorance – try telling that to a group of highly educated Greek intellectuals – and his way in, if you like, is this story from the past. Now, Paul says, this unknown god, the god you don’t know, the god you are ignorant of, I do know him and I’ll tell you about him. Let’s explore together what he is like.

Paul, of course knew about God from the many ways he is revealed in the Old Testament but he begins with the most basic. He describes God as the Creator, the Lord of heaven and earth. Many people today have a sense of awe when they look at the beauty of creation and some may have some sort of belief in a creator. Paul says God is the Maker not the made. He does not live in a man-made temple and nor does he need anything from human beings. Here the Epicureans would have been nodding in agreement.

Then Paul goes on to say: “Rather he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.” Paul is preaching biblical truth but without quoting from the Bible; instead he is making statements that follow a line of argument familiar to the Stoics – that the gods exist and that they order the world and care for the well-being of humankind.

Furthermore, says Paul, God has made all the nations of the world from one common origin, and in support of this he appeals to two Greek poets: Epimenides (remember him) who wrote: “For in thee we live and have our being.” And Aratus who said: “We are his offspring.” Both of these poets were originally referring to Zeus as the supreme being of Greek and especially Stoic philosophy but here Paul wants it to apply to the God of the Bible. So far he has been focussing on the ideas that he and his listeners agree on but now he has to make a delicate switch and introduce some things that will challenge them.

God’s purpose in making humanity, says Paul, was so that they might inhabit the whole earth – everyone would have been in agreement with that – and to seek God and perhaps to reach out and find him. The greek verb carries a definite sense of ‘maybe’ – maybe they might find him but maybe not. Also, the Greek word translated as ‘reach out’ has the sense of groping in the dark or feeling around like a blind person might have to do.

The Athenians had been doing just that, feeling or reaching out towards God but, as Paul points out, what they had ended up with was the plethora of gold, silver, and stone images that surrounded them – something that the great bulk of the people may have worshipped but which even their own teachers had rejected as foolish.

Paul now goes back to the start of his argument – the unknown god that they were ignorant of. The days of groping in the dark, the days of ignorance are past, says Paul. God had previously overlooked their ignorance but now, as a result of what has

happened through Christ's death and resurrection, things have changed. God's message of salvation is now longer limited to the Jews. "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them," as we read before.

All along Paul has been working up to this point. The Athenians need to break decisively with their religious past; they need to respond to the one God who has now been made known to them and who invites them to be part of the renewed world that is coming into being. Paul tells them they must repent, - and repentance, remember, is not so much about being sorry as to turn from one way of living to another; so they need to turn from worshipping idols to worshipping the one true God that Paul is telling them about.

The matter is all the more urgent because a day of judgment is coming. Barclay writes: "Life is neither a progress to extinction, as it was to the Epicureans, nor a pathway to absorption to God, as it was for the Stoics; it is a journey to the judgment seat of Christ where Jesus Christ is the Judge." And the proof of this, says Paul, is that God has raised Jesus from the dead (v31).

Well, then, as now, it is the resurrection of Jesus that provokes a reaction. Some began to ridicule the whole thing; some were interested and wanted to hear more and a few became believers.

Today

So far we have been concentrating on Paul and his experiences in Athens. But what does it all mean for us today?

Firstly I think we can learn from the manner of Paul's approach as he engages with the culture around him. He recognizes that for the Athenians an appeal to what the Bible says will not cut much ice and instead he makes use of their own poets. Today, also, people are increasingly ignorant of what the Bible has to say and much less likely to accept it. What are the messages we can agree on as we reach out to people today?

Paul listens and learns before he speaks so he understands where people are really at. His way in to the conversation was the legend of the unknown god. I wonder what the 'unknown gods' are in today's culture. What are people really concerned about and how should that shape the message we present?

Also, although Paul is disturbed by the idolatry he see around him, he is not dismissive, but seeks points of contact with the world-view of the people he is talking to. His argument challenges the way they are living but his approach is to present the gospel as an invitation to a new life. He confronts, but he does so honestly and respectfully.

Secondly I think we can learn from the content of Paul's message. Whether we are exploring the gospel with people who know little about it, or whether we find ourselves wondering about God and about life as we face painful and unsettling circumstances, it is good to go back to the basics that Paul presents here. Paul proclaims God in his most basic roles as creator and sustainer of life, the one who is

sovereign over all the nations and the events of history, the one who has a purpose for each one of us and for the whole creation. Paul has revealed the unknown god as one who is merciful, willing to overlook our mistaken ignorance and who is willing to help if we turn to him. But Paul always comes back to the heart of his message which is about Jesus and the resurrection. Tom Wright makes the point that we only learn the deepest truths about God himself by looking at Jesus, the image of the invisible God as it says in Colossians 1. It is through Jesus' death on the cross that we see the generous, overflowing, self-sacrificial love of God for all humanity. And it is Jesus' resurrection that gives us a sure hope for a new life now, and in the age that is coming.

But as we know, Jesus and the resurrection get mixed reactions now just as they did in Paul's day. Some people are like the Epicureans and reject outright the resurrection and any idea of an afterlife; they reject Christianity. Richard Dawkins comes to mind as an example of this world-view. Some, like the Stoics, have a vague idea that some part of us continues to exist in some form – a bit like the poem that begins: "Do not stand at my grave and weep; I am not there ... and then goes on to say that the person is in the wind, the sun and the rain, and the soft stars that shine at night. It is a beautiful poem but unfortunately sub-Christian, because for us, as Christians, the resurrection remains a pivotal truth. As Paul writes in his letter to the Corinthians: "If Christ has not been raised our preaching is useless and so is your faith." (1 Cor 15:14). Because of Jesus, God doesn't remain distant and unknown. The events that we remember this Easter season form the core of our faith, truths that can sustain us in difficult times, as well giving us a message of hope to share with others.

Our theme today has been 'Exploring the Unknown' and we have been looking at the way in which Paul introduces the Athenians to the 'unknown god' that they had been worshipping. They had been groping in the dark, but Paul challenges their long-held world views and introduces them to the God that he knows. He knows God because he has chosen to reveal himself in ways that have been written down for us in the Old Testament. Also Paul has encountered the risen and ascended Jesus, God's living word who together with the Holy Spirit continues to reveal the heart of God and the purposes of God to us today. We can never fully know God but he need no longer be the 'unknown god.' Instead he invites us to enter into the new life that is possible because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and to get to know him better and better as we move through this life and into the life that is to come. Amen.

Let's pray

Loving Father God, thank you for making yourself known to us in your Son Jesus. Thank you for the new life we have in him. Please help us to learn from Paul's example and show us ways in which we can share the good news of Jesus with those around us. For his name's sake we pray. Amen.