

## Paul In Athens

### Acts 17:22-31

<sup>22</sup> So Paul, standing before the council,<sup>[a]</sup> addressed them as follows: “Men of Athens, I notice that you are very religious in every way, <sup>23</sup> for as I was walking along I saw your many shrines. And one of your altars had this inscription on it: ‘To an Unknown God.’ This God, whom you worship without knowing, is the one I’m telling you about.

<sup>24</sup> “He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since he is Lord of heaven and earth, he doesn’t live in man-made temples, <sup>25</sup> and human hands can’t serve his needs—for he has no needs. He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need. <sup>26</sup> From one man<sup>[b]</sup> he created all the nations throughout the whole earth. He decided beforehand when they should rise and fall, and he determined their boundaries.

<sup>27</sup> “His purpose was for the nations to seek after God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him—though he is not far from any one of us. <sup>28</sup> For in him we live and move and exist. As some of your<sup>[c]</sup> own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’ <sup>29</sup> And since this is true, we shouldn’t think of God as an idol designed by craftsmen from gold or silver or stone.

<sup>30</sup> “God overlooked people’s ignorance about these things in earlier times, but now he commands everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and turn to him. <sup>31</sup> For he has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man he has appointed, and he proved to everyone who this is by raising him from the dead.”

#### 1. The Unknown...

- a. Many countries including NZ have a tomb to an unknown soldier. The remains of one soldier who died in combat, usually who was not able to be identified, is buried in a place of honour. They represent the many unidentified who died in combat, thus giving honour to them all. In this way all are remembered and honoured.
- b. In the time of Paul, in Athens, there was a similar concept. They had an altar to “an Unknown God”. The Greeks believed that “the gods’ could be capricious and could get mean and spiteful if they were slighted or ignored. Who wanted to have their life messed with by getting on the wrong side of a god, even if it was unintentional? Their solution was pragmatically simple. Have an altar to an “unknown god” and you have all bases covered. Underlying it was a sense of uncertainty about the ‘gods’, what they were like and how best to deal with them.

#### 2. Paul’s Motivation

- a. Paul has a primary objective in all he does – no matter what the context. He is in Athens on Mars Hill, at the centre of social and political power. Where the movers and shakers are. **Tell them about Jesus?**
- b. We follow Jesus Christ. What is our primary objective? Should it be similar or dissimilar to Paul’s? Does it matter? When we look at Matthew 28:18-20: *Jesus came and told his disciples, “I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. <sup>19</sup> Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations,<sup>[a]</sup> baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. <sup>20</sup> Teach these new disciples to*

*obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”*

- c. The first step of making disciples is telling others the story of Jesus. Which is what evangelism means. Telling good news!
- d. I must admit that when I became a Christian as a young man and realized that I was meant to tell others I got a bit fluttery in the stomach and sweaty in the palms. This wasn't helped by my first attempts being a bit clumsy as well.
  - i. It led to a breakup with a girlfriend. She didn't like me asking about what she believed.
  - ii. It strained my relationship with my parents for a wee while.
  - iii. It gave my grandfather comfort and peace as he lay dying of cancer.

I slowly got better at it and more effective. As they say if a thing is worth doing it is worth doing badly.... Until you get better at it.

Have some of us given up on finding ways to talk about Jesus because we didn't do it well?

- e. Why are we following Jesus? To belong to a religious club? To be good? Out of habit? Getting a sense of identity in the community? Why do we? What is our primary motivation? None of these may be wrong but are they of the quality of primary objective?

### 3. Paul's Strategy

- a. Not just tell them about Jesus. Not how do I tell them about Jesus, and I couldn't care about whether I am effective in getting my message across, but **how do I tell them about Jesus in a way that is effective.**
- b. Paul's strategy is to start with where they are in their understanding and thinking – the altar to the unknown god. He uses this to build a bridge to Jesus. *To an Unknown God. 'This God, whom you worship without knowing, is the one I'm telling you about.*
- c. Our culture today does not have "an altar to an Unknown God". What are the god's that people put their security in?
  - i. Retirement savings and a nice house.
  - ii. Looking after my health.
  - iii. Having a good job with disposable income.
  - iv. Education.
  - v. Perhaps all of the above.
- d. Then along comes Covid 19 and virtually all the things we put our security and trust in are shown to be very fragile. Perhaps good conversation starters are:
  - i. "What questions about life has Covid 19 raised for you?"
  - ii. 'At a deep level what shook you the most about Covid 19"

### 4. The Response

- a. It was a mixed bag. Some mocked him. Some wanted to talk to him more and the consequence was: v34 *"but some joined him and became believers. Among them were Dionysius, a member of the council,<sup>[d]</sup> a woman named Damaris, and others with them."*
- b. The response we will get will also be a mixed bag. We need to harden up to the negative response and rejoice when doors open to us.
- c. **So where do we start?**

- i. Probably not on Mars Hill or the local equivalent! It is in the relationships we already have where the bridge is strong enough that we can begin to risk(faith) asking questions as suggested above....and listen to the answer. Don't feel you have to solve the answer there and then. These could be ongoing conversations over time.
- ii. **Targeted Prayer. Thy kingdom come.**  
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