

## **An unknown God?**

The city of Athens was great and thriving city. It was prosperous. Economically, it was second only to Rome itself, and intellectually, spiritually and artistically it was without peer. It had been the centre of learning for hundreds of years. It was in Athens that the idea of democracy first came about. It was Athens that gave the world great thinkers like Aristotle, Plato and Socrates.

As well as this great tradition of philosophy and mathematics and science, Athens also held a great religious tradition. I read that in the first century AD there were over 30,000 idols in Athens.

They were very religious, but they didn't put all their eggs in one basket. They worshipped lots of Gods, and depending on their needs and desires, they would worship different Gods at different times. If you were going on a sea voyage, you might make an offering to Poseidon, or if you were about to bring in your harvest you might favour Demeter, in the hopes that she may in turn favour you.

It was into this city that the apostle Paul came. There he was: bringing the good news of Jesus, and he found the people were all over the place in their religion and their philosophy.

His first stop was the synagogue: which he did whenever he arrived in a new place - they were 'his people' after all – they were just like he had been before his conversion on the road to Damascus. Paul was a Jew: he tells us in his letter to the Philippians (3:5) he was circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee. He had been committed to serving God through following the Jewish law that was learned from the Torah. He had held that by living in accordance with the Torah, he could be made right with God. That was the Jewish belief, their hope.

Acts chapter 17 tells us when Paul was in Athens, he was he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks (17:16-17) Paul would have told them, as he told so many people throughout his journeys, that becoming righteous before God was impossible by their own efforts. Paul proclaimed that all people were sinners, and it is by God's grace alone, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, that we can be made righteous. It is in Jesus, and only in Jesus, where that hope is found.

But not only did Paul engage with the people of the Jewish faith, but he also went to the marketplace and spoke to the people there. He certainly got some attention in the market: group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." (17:18a)

The Epicureans, as you might guess, were followers of the philosopher Epicurus. Epicureanism doesn't deny the existence of God, but doesn't believe that God intervenes in the world. So Epicureans didn't seek rightness with God, they just pursued pleasure. It remains a popular philosophy today, even if it's not called 'Epicureanism'. If this world is as good as it gets, why not get the most pleasure you can? People today who take pleasure in eating and drinking are called "epicurean" – sometimes the term is used as a synonym for 'gourmet'. Enjoying food and drink is okay – and I hope we all enjoy good food and drink and the things of the world, but I hope we all remember that there is something more.

The other group that began debating with Paul was the Stoics. Stoicism is a branch of philosophy that had developed in Athens, and held that people's lives and our circumstances

were determined by fate. The best response to that was for people to not care about pleasure or wealth or success. Instead, they wanted people to be content with what they had. They didn't have any hope that things would get better, and if things got worse, well, they couldn't do anything about it. As people sometimes say, "It is what it is."

I think we still have Stoics today – people who resign themselves to their situations. People who have given up. I think of the 'Tang ping' people of modern China, who choose to (often literally) 'lay flat' and do the minimum to survive, or people who live on welfare for generation after generation in this country and many others.

The Epicureans and Stoics had quite different philosophies, but at their heart they had a similar basis – there was no hope. The Epicureans wanted to make the most of things, while the Stoics just wanted to get through them.

Paul arrived in their city and in their marketplace, and told them that there was hope – and that hope was in Jesus. Luke records that that they asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?"

They didn't know what to make of Paul and his message about Jesus and the resurrection. So they took him to a meeting of the Areopagus. The Areopagus was where the greatest minds of Athens met. People gathered there, whether Athenian or foreign, and spent their time doing nothing but listening to and discussing the latest ideas. TED talks have fallen in popularity in recent years, but I think that's the closest thing we've had in recent years – people gathering just to share ideas.

It's not mentioned whether anything was ever achieved by the Areopagus, but achieving things wasn't really the point. It was about being learned or wise, and exploring ideas rather than implementing them.

These various philosophers took Paul to the Areopagus and asked him to say more. "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean."

It seems that, despite their well-established philosophies, they were quite willing to consider what it was that Paul was talking about. Maybe they just wanted something new to discuss among themselves, a new philosophy to pick apart. Or perhaps, this idea of hope that Paul was sharing was appealing.

In any case, Paul was asked to address the Areopagus... and we know Paul wouldn't miss the opportunity to share. And that's where our reading today began:

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious." (17:22) Paul tells them that he had walked around the city and looked carefully at what he saw. This was a good opening – he didn't start by telling them that they were wrong, instead he complemented them on their religiosity. Then he explained that he'd taken the time to carefully look at their city.

You've probably heard the term 'marketplace of ideas', and first century Athens would have lived up to that phrase, with temple after temple and shrine after shrine and idol after idol. I wonder if you would get a similar impression of 21<sup>st</sup> century Sydney – if you looked carefully at what you saw around our city, what would you think were our societies objects of worship? Yes, there are cathedrals and churches – which would have once dominated the skyline, but are now overshadowed by office towers. So maybe our society worships business.

There may have been 30,000 idols in ancient Athens, but I suspect there's close to that number of coffee shops in Sydney... maybe that's what our society worships?

And while ancient Athens had a marketplace, we have malls and arcades which can sell you all manner of consumer goods. Maybe our society worships commerce?

I know some people do often take their coffee very, very seriously, but I'm not sure that many people really worship it. But business, and commerce, and financial success? Oh yes. That's where many people today find their hope. There's plenty of good things that can come from business and commerce and having money... but lasting hope? Not so much.

Paul tells the Athenians that he even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. Someone had taken the time to build an altar to a God they didn't know. 'Just in case,' I guess. And they presumably worshiped and made offerings at that altar, too. 'Just in case.'. If none of the other 29,999 idols in the city met your needs, perhaps this one would?

There were and are many false hopes for people. But Paul used the broad religious base of Athenian society to point people toward the God who made the world and everything in it. He may have been an unknown God to the people, but as Paul wrote to the Romans, 'For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse'. (Romans 1:27).

"Let me tell you about this unknown God", Paul effectively says to the people. He compares God to the gods honoured by the temples, shrines and idols of Athens: [God] does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. (17:24-25a). Our God, he says, is not a god who gets his power from humans. You don't need to build God a temple. He's not a God who demands tributes.

Instead, says Paul, God himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. (17:25b). Our God is not one who takes, but one who gives. The one who gave his only son.

Paul points out in this speech that God has "marked out their appointed times in history." God has made it so that we know that we are going to die. So that, according to Paul, we would "... they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him." Find hope – find true hope.

People seek hope in all sorts of things, mostly in our society, through accumulating wealth and building grander homes and buildings. But as they say, "you can't take it with you." They will all eventually fade away.

But God gives us hope, and as Paul said to the Athenians, he is not far from any one of us. In Jesus, he became one of us. Lived among us.

God is not a distant God. If you want to know what God is like, look to Jesus. Paul later wrote to the Colossians (1:15) The Son is the image of the invisible God, and as Jesus said, Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father (John 14:9), or even more clearly "I and the Father are one." (John 10:30).

God is not an unknown God who we should turn to 'just in case' or when things go wrong, but God is near and we can know him because we can know his son. Paul shares two quotes to support this: 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

What profound things to say. Where do they come from? The Psalms? One of the prophets? No. 'For in him we live and move and have our being' comes from the Cretan philosopher Epimenides and 'We are his offspring' comes from the Cilician Stoic philosopher Aratus.

I think it nicely shows Paul's broad education. But these two sayings also affirm that God is not distant – that we don't have to approach God through intermediaries or altars or idols, that we depend on him (whether we know it or not) and that he has a relationship with us.

Paul moves on to the conclusion of his speech: because we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. (17:29-30)

Don't think, he says, that God is just another of the gods in your pantheon. Don't think, he says, that God is just another of your idols. In the past, you didn't know the truth about God... but now you do.

You need to change – Paul used the word 'repent' but that's what it means – to change. You were doing the wrong thing, but now you know, so get things right.

Finally, he tells the people of Athens that they can't just continue like they have been doing forever, because judgement is coming - For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead." (17:31)

That is how Paul ends his sermon, by telling them of the certainty of judgement because of the certainty of Jesus' resurrection.

That's where our reading today ends, too, but it's not where the story ends. In the following verses, we learn that some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." [and that] some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. (17:33-34)

As we share our faith, as we share the good news with others, some will sneer, some will not be convinced but will want to hear more, and some will accept the good news and put their faith not in an unknown god, but in Jesus.

Amen