

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, April 27, 2008
Rev. John Tapscott

“MAKING KNOWN THE UNKNOWN GOD”

Acts 17:16-34 (sermon text v. 23)

I'm currently reading Billy Graham's interesting autobiography, entitled, "Just As I Am". In early 1950 Billy Graham was invited by some Boston clergy to conduct an evangelistic campaign in that city. He writes, "Though I was intimidated by Boston's reputation as the educational and cultural capital of the United States, I took the opportunity to conduct a campaign there as a gift from God."

Perhaps this was how the apostle Paul felt when he came to Athens, the intellectual and philosophical capital of the world. But he walked around, Paul's spirit was provoked by the idols he saw, statues of Greek gods. Now Paul was no intellectual light-weight - quite the opposite in fact - but even if he felt by Athens' reputation but he took this as an opportunity to conduct a campaign there on behalf of the true and living God. He went into the synagogues and the marketplace daily to proclaim Jesus and the resurrection. Some philosophers brought Paul to the Areopagus to have him present his new teaching. The Areopagus was a hill built in tribute to the Greek god Ares, and had become a gathering area for public lectures. In the Areopagus, Paul said to the crowd, "People of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along, and observed your objects of worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, "To an unknown god." Paul was right. The Athenians were very religious. They had a god for every occasion. And in case they had overlooked some god they built an altar, "To an unknown god" in order to please that god. Paul wasn't condemning the Athenians. He knew they were doing this in ignorance. But he would not leave them there. He said, "What therefore you worship as unknown, I proclaim to you." (Acts 17:23)

If Paul were to stand today at Yonge-Dundas Square and speak to a great crowd, he might say, "People of Canada, I see that you are very religious." And so we are. It's true for all humans. We have a yearning to worship something or someone greater than ourselves. Worship means "that to which you ascribe your highest worth." But so often give our worship to idols, to gods of our own making. Canada cannot really be described as a Christian country anymore, partly because of the presence of many religious traditions, but mostly because Canada has become a secular country. Most Canadians make decisions and live without any reference to God.

So what are the objects of worship in Canada today? Well, Paul might point to our business skyscrapers, our sports stadiums, our gambling casinos, our shopping malls, our desire for security and success and individual freedom, our bowing down before celebrity and the fountain of youth. I think of that as I see joggers on Sunday morning. There nothing wrong with being in shape, but there's a soul you need to keep fit, too. Indeed, there's not much wrong with anything I've mentioned, well, except for gambling. But there is something wrong when these become your idol. Even family can become an idol. Now family is very important, but to put family ahead of God is a mistake, since it's only under God that marriage and family life become what they are meant to be. We Canadians are very religious and we have plenty of idols. But are these idols worthy of our worship? Is your god big enough for you? Will this god who save you and sustain you to the end and beyond? And even believers sometimes have idols which are not much different than the idols of our secular friends. So our task as Christians and as the church is clear in this day and age. It is to make known the unknown God at every opportunity that God provides. "What therefore you worship as unknown, I now proclaim to you." Let's consider three implications of Paul's words.

First, that the true God remains unknown to us until He makes himself known to us.

Paul was telling the Athenians that we can't know the true and living god through human philosophy or speculation. Paul told them that God is not far from us, but on our own we grope after God, like a person stumbling in the dark. We make idols of what we think God is like. Despite all their learning the wise people of Athens were still in the dark about God. In fact, the statue "to an unknown God" was an admission that philosophy had not led them to God. Paul makes this point clearly in the 1st Corinthian letter. He says that "the world did not know God through wisdom..."

The truth is that we can't know God as really he is until God steps forward and makes himself known to us. God is holy mystery we say, but when God chooses to limit himself and come to us in a way that we can understand, then some of the mystery is overcome, and we can begin to know who God is and what he is like. Paul told the Athenians that God is our Maker who gives us life and breath and all things and a place to live. We are God's offspring, says Paul. In God we live and move and have our being. And how do we know all this about God? It's because God has made this known to us. The theological term for this is "revelation." You see, the starting point for knowledge about God not with us; it's with God. We don't come to God; he comes to us and makes himself known to us. We can't get to God through human philosophy, but by attending to God's revelation of himself. "What therefore you worship as unknown, I now proclaim to you."

The second implication of Paul's words is this: ***that the unknown God has made***

himself known in Jesus Christ.

Paul says in Romans that we can know God's deity and eternal power through the things He has made. God doesn't leave us completely in the dark; he reveals something of his nature through His creation. But the philosophers of Athens had missed it.

God's revelation of himself through creation is never enough for us. So God began to reveal himself more fully by choosing Israel and making himself known through his mighty works on their behalf. God called Israel to be a light to the nations, proclaiming and living the truth about God. Now Israel was sometimes obedient to the task, and sometimes not, but at least they faithfully recorded God's revelation of himself. That is what we call today the Old Testament. And God's revelation to and through Israel was a preparation for an even fuller revelation of himself through His Son. Paul knew that we cannot know God as he really is apart from Jesus Christ. So in the marketplaces and synagogues of Athens he spoke of Jesus and the resurrection. In his speech at the Areopagus Paul spoke of God "judging the world by a man he has appointed and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." And the man he's speaking of is Jesus. Paul's preaching inevitably led people to Jesus Christ.

The New Testament claims that the unknown God has revealed himself as he really is in Christ. "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father," Jesus said. Paul in Colossians calls Jesus the "image of the invisible God." The New Testament proclaims that the unknown God has made himself known fully and finally, at least as far as humans can grasp, in Jesus Christ. If you want to know who God is and what he is like, look at Jesus - his life, his teachings, his works, his death, his resurrection victory. And it doesn't matter what religion we claim, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim or even Christian, for even Christians get confused on this. Whatever we think and say and believe about God must be informed and judged and corrected by what we see in Jesus. Christ. "For there is nothing in God which is not like Jesus." The unknown God makes himself known in Jesus, and it is this God whom the church proclaims to the world. "What therefore you worship as unknown, I now proclaim to you."

One more implication of Paul's words. ***Now that the unknown God has made himself known to us, he requires a response from us.***

Paul said, "God has overlooked the times of ignorance but now commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man who he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." A few souls responded to Paul's message. Now Paul didn't have as much success as Billy Graham had in Boston, but that was already Christian territory, whereas Paul's message was so new to the Athenians. Paul's harvest seemed small at the

time, but he was sowing seeds for a great harvest later on.

Acts tells us that in response to Paul's speech some Athenians "mocked when they heard of the resurrection of the dead." That was a stumbling block for them. I think our great stumbling block today is the idea of divine judgement. Today we assume history will just go on and on with no final day of accountability. We mock the idea of a day on which God brings it all to an end and calls people and nations to account. But God is not going to let unbelief and sin and injustice and unrighteousness go on forever and ever. God will cause his will to be done throughout the creation. History is "his-story", God's story, and the set day of judgement is clear Biblical truth. One day we will stand before God, not a God of our Making, but the true and living God and the whole world will be judged according to God's perfect righteousness. And who among us could stand before God on their own that day - sinners before a holy God - and not fall short and be rejected? Not I, and probably not you, either.

But here's the Good News of the Gospel. God loves all people, each one of us, so much that he has already acted to prepare us for that day and keep us safe forever. God has appointed Jesus as judge for the last day and has already sent him into the world to be our Saviour through his life, his death for our sins and resurrection victory. And if we are trusting in Christ, He will not only judge us in righteousness on that day, but stand beside us as our advocate. We will be accepted by God and not rejected; we will live and not perish because His Son is standing with us and beside us. God will declare us righteous, holy and forgiven and bring us safely to eternal life. Christ is our hope, our only hope for the set day of judgement, but he is a sure hope. God overlooked the times of ignorance but now that he has made himself known to us he calls us to a response. God calls all people to repent, turn to Him in faith and put all of our trust in His Son Jesus Christ.

A Mercedes Benz ad a few years ago spoke of safety features that had been developed by Mercedes Benz, but now used by all the car makers. Why? "Because", said the ad, "there are some things that are just too important not to share." That was Paul's motivation for proclaiming the unknown God to the Athenians. And it's the church's motivation for proclaiming the true and living God at every opportunity. "There are some things that are just too important not to share." This is what the church says to the world. "What you worship as unknown, I now proclaim to you." May God use our faithful witness to bring about a harvest of souls for His Kingdom.