

## **To an Unknown God** ***Easter 6***

*Acts 17: 22-31*  
*1 Peter 3:13-22*  
*John 14:15-21*

It is very hard to imagine how people thought about God in the time of Jesus. We are used to the idea that there really is only one God. Different religions interpret him in different ways: Muslims call him Allah; Jews call him Yahweh or Jehovah; and Christians call him just God or perhaps the Lord. But we certainly do not suppose that there are lots of different gods.

But the Greeks and Romans did in the time of Jesus. And many of the Roman names for gods live on in the names of planets: Jupiter, Neptune, Minerva, Mars, Venus, Mercury.

And when Paul went to Athens, the capital city of Greece he found that there was an altar to every God you could name. But what was most interesting of all was that there was an altar to the god without a name. And inscribed on the stone of the altar were the words

To an Unknown God.

Acts 17:23

It may seem rather strange. It may seem a little bit like an insurance policy:

“We’ll make an altar for every god we can think of –  
and then we’ll make an extra altar.  
Just in case we have missed one.”

They clearly thought there was an unknown god. They clearly had this gnawing sense that although they’d got gods for everything under the sun – a God of war a god of love a god of the harvest – there was one they had overlooked. There was something missing.

And Paul, ever on the balls sees his chance,

“Yes he says. There is an unknown god.  
And I will tell you about him.”

It is my guess that many people in our own time have a sense of there being an unknown god. They may have everything that life can offer in the normal way of things – and yet there is something missing. Or perhaps they have very little that life can offer, perhaps life is difficult and yet they have a conviction that there is hope.

And the answer we have is that there is something missing. And it can be found. And there is hope. And they are all the same. They are all Jesus Christ.

The point about Jesus is that he is no longer an unknown god. He is the known God. He is known in that we can read his life story in the gospels; we can read his words. We can imagine him in all the pictures that John’s gospel gives us. He is

- the good shepherd
- the light of the world
- the bread of life
- the way, the truth and the life.
- the vine
- the resurrection
- the gate of the sheepfold

But more than that we can know his presence in our hearts through his Holy Spirit. When Jesus promises his disciples that they will be filled with the Holy Spirit he is promising that their lives will be filled by someone they already know:

You know him,  
because he abides with you,  
and he will be in you.

John 14:17

The promise is not just for those first disciples. The promise is for us. And for most of us the coming of the holy spirit is a slow and gentle process. It begins with a conscious decision to try to follow Jesus and to be more like him. To make a deliberate decision that we will love our fellow human beings and that if our lives are made difficult, more complicated, because we love our neighbours then we won't stop loving them.

We will do it because Jesus did it for us:

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all,  
the righteous for the unrighteous,  
in order to bring you to God.

1 Peter 3:18

And we will be rewarded. I don't mean you will get an OBE or anything like that – they are of no very great value. And nor do I mean that you will go to heaven after you are dead. That is not why we do good. The reward will be that as we become more like Jesus so we will know his presence in our lives.

St Paul, writing to people he loved very much, put it in a very strange way:

I am again in the pains of childbirth  
until Christ is formed in you.

Galatians 4:19

It is as if as we grow in love so Christ himself starts to form inside our hearts. That is an amazing promise. An amazing miracle. And that is the miracle that begins today in Megan and Lucy.

N Clews  
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