

“The Known God”

Athens was a city “full of idols” and full of very religious people. They were so interested in things spiritual that they had a council that served as the custodians of teachings – supervising the worship of the many gods. In many respects, they were a microcosm of people throughout the ages. Go to any time or place – and there you will find religion.

Here in the United States there is a plethora of spiritual leaders – influencers of all kinds. Spirituality abounds! Ask almost anyone, and you’ll get the response – “oh yes, I believe in God.” But like Athens – the question is – “Who is this God?”

St. Paul was preaching Jesus and the resurrection – which was foreign to them – so when teaching them about who God is – he directs their attention to their own altar erected “TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.” These folks were not atheists (who believe there is no god) – but rather, agnostics (who question whether one can really know god).

Paul sets out to preach to them what they worship as “unknown” – and he preaches the same sermon he preaches everywhere and to all people – Jesus Christ, and Him crucified and risen from the dead.

Paul begins with what they know – and what people of all ages know – that there is a power and wisdom that is greater than all mankind. This can be known simply by observing nature.

The beautiful flowers and animals – the sunrise and sunset – reveal something about the One who has created such things. The patterns of the sun, moon and stars – the seasons, seedtime and harvest – all these point to a superior creative and sustaining power.

Of course, one also observes tornados, floods, drought, disease and death – which leads one to conclude that “something’s not right.” Add to that our conscience which tells us right and wrong, and condemns us for the chaos and pain we have caused.

That's all we can know of God from nature – that something is wrong, that we've done wrong – that we have somehow “angered the gods.” But we still don't know who God is – and left to ourselves – we try to fill in the blanks. That's man-made religion – an attempt to come up with our own way of “appeasing the gods.”

The Athenians, with their human wisdom, concluded that there were many different gods who controlled different things – and so they came up with an elaborate array of spiritual exercises to get on the good side of all these gods. In their never-ended pursuit of peace with the gods – they were always open to new ideas – and their altar TO THE UNKNOWN GOD was probably an attempt to cover all the bases.

That which they eagerly desired, Paul now proclaims to them – the one and only true God who is the Creator of the world and everything in it. The true God “does not live in temples made by human hands, nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything ...” God doesn't need anything from you – not your sacrifices, your devotion, or your praise!

Think about that for a moment. God wouldn't be much of a god if He were dependent upon the things He has created – like a newborn infant is dependent upon his parents. And what kind of God would He be if His creation dictated who He was, and where He would dwell?

God alone is the giver and sustainer of all life. He is the God of life – but the world around us preaches death. Where there was once only harmony and life – there is turmoil and destruction. Something is clearly wrong – deadly wrong!

This is the dilemma that you face. “How do I appease God? How do I make up for my sin? How do I escape destruction?” Left to yourself, you will come up with all sorts of creative ways to appease God – but there is only one way – one sacrifice for sin – one appeasement of God's wrath --- even as there is only one true God.

This is who Paul and all the apostles preach to you – Jesus Christ, who “died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.”

The very thing that so many Christian churches throw out because they see it as a hindrance to the mission of the Church – is the very Christ who promises that He will not leave you as orphans, but comes to dwell with you.

Like the Athenians, the Apostle Paul calls us to repent of our false worship and spirituality – designing God and our worship of Him in our own image. The true worship is revealed and given to you in Christ Jesus. God did not create you and then leave you to rot in your sin – He comes to you in the flesh of His only-begotten Son, to redeem you, recreate you, and resurrect you to new life.

The true God is not far away – unknown and inaccessible – He is near to you. Jesus is present here, absolving you, cleansing your conscience from all guilt, feeding you with His very Body and Blood – satisfying your desire for peace with God.

All of this is not from man, but from God – who alone determines where He will dwell and where you will find Him. God locates Himself in His Word and Sacraments so that He might come to you and provide for all your needs.

This is the true worship of the one true God – to receive what He promises and offers – to live in the freedom of His forgiveness, and in the new and resurrected life that He gives to all who believe in Jesus Christ. What you, and all the world needs – God has made known, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.