

**SERMON FOR the 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Easter 21.5.17**  
**ALL SAINTS CHURCH, BIRKENHEAD**  
**REV JORDAN GREATBATCH**

Though we may think it, religion is not dead in our modern world. In an article published in 2013 I read the story of a shrine being built by an Indian film star which will include a 5ft 6in statue of the cricket legend Sachin Tendulkar. The idol of the star, sporting a blue jersey with the World Cup in his hand, is made of marble and it is hoped the temple will provide an opportunity to the lovers of cricket from around the world to pay their respects to these cricketers who are “nothing short of gods in India.”

As much as I love the game of cricket, I don't think I will be visiting the shrine I have to say. Now the idea of an Idol of Tendulkar may seem silly to us, but for many in our world, such statues are still a part of their religious world view. And it was the same for western culture 2000 years ago.

So we can image in our reading from Acts today of Paul the Apostle wandering the streets of ancient Athens, immersed in this world of idols and temples. We are told that as Paul took in the sights of Athens he noticed in the corner of his eye a lonely altar, obscured by a few branches which he brushed away to reveal the words “to an unknown God” carved into the faded, moss covered stone.

There was an ancient proverb about the city which he found himself in that day. It declared “there were more gods in Athens than men.”

Everywhere he looked in Athens there would have been hundreds of statues made of marble depicting strong heroes and beautiful maidens in long flowing tunics. These were the Gods of Athens in all their glory.

It would have been a feast for the eyes, a sensory overload, and for Paul, a former Pharisee and devout Jew it was all too much, until he noticed something strange amongst the statues and idols. He noticed an obscure altar that read ‘to unknown God’.

After this encounter Paul started to speak in the synagogues of Athens we are told. Where he came across some Greek philosophers, who after hearing Paul speak of a 'foreign divinity' invited him to share before a crowd of learned men and women who loved to hear of anything new and exotic.

So Paul, analysing the culture and context he witnessed around him, grasped on to that image of the altar to the unknown God, which the Athenians had now long forgotten was in their midst. For the Greeks loved new ideas and at the prospect of some strange foreign religion they were eager to listen, and Paul certainly had something to say.

If we picture a modern day university lecture hall, or perhaps even some of our churches. We all love hearing something new, something exotic, and something that makes religion fresh and appealing to the surrounding culture.

Be it the newest self-help book on a day time talk show, or even the latest 'Christian' book on the revolutionary 12 steps to more money and better health. There is an insatiable hunger for all things new, buy a new iPad, and than 3 months later retire it to the shelf to collect dust when the new iPad arrives.

Many of us, including myself I-may-add seek after these objects and philosophies because they are so readily available, so accessible and don't require too much of our investment.

It is very much like Paul noticing out of the corner of his eyes that lonely altar to an unknown God, for God is forever ever in our midst, we have just replaced him with images, advertisement, and the latest fad, it seems nothing changes.

For the Athenians were all about what was in fashion in the world of religion, which came out of this genuine desire to ask the big questions of life, why are we here? Is there a God? The one big problem that Paul faced was that they indeed had

many God's, so how was he to convince them that no one had yet disclosed this 'unknown god'.

Well I think this passage offers a lot of hope for us who struggle in a pluralistic world. The hope being that God didn't forget the Athenians; in fact the spirit of God was actively at work to make 'known' that which was to them 'unknown', through the work of Paul the Apostle.

Paul had gifts that were suited to confront the smorgasbord of religions available in Athens. He understood the Greeks were highly intelligent people, and also very spiritual and he appealed to this nature. He announced to them "I see you're very religious, I see you have constructed many idols in your pursuit for the truth about God, 'but this I proclaim to you'...." God is in your midst".

Paul's Proclamation wasn't about persuading the Athenians through a shouting match or the fear of punishment, it was simply explaining as best he could the hope that was within him, the hope that there was a God who could be known, and in fact

had been in their midst this whole time. If we were to give this idea a name it would be what theologians call 'general revelation' which is that deep sense of God found in the order of the world, as Paul says "that everyone may search for God and perhaps find him"

We as Christians can often patronise those outside our faith as having no notion of any sort of truth. This passage confronts us with the idea that even those who Paul would of deemed 'pagans' had a deep sense that there was a God even though it was misplaced. We see this evidenced in our own history of missionary endeavour in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The most successful missionaries were those who used parts of the culture that connected peoples with the idea of a universal God who had always been at work in the world. Paul's message was that this God is found in the person of Jesus Christ, the visible image of the invisible God, and this was the good news.

Our western society compared to the east can often look a world apart from ancient Greece in terms of

belief. We live in a culture that seems to have no time for religion, it is seen as archaic. But that same message that Paul spoke to the Athenians, is the same message that we have today, but how will we proclaim it?

Many people in our modern world have tucked away in the corner of their hearts, something akin to that lonely altar a part dedicated “to an unknown God”. It manifests itself in different ways. Be it by what they buy, how much they earn or what the culture tells them to be. It is then up to us, The Church, to know our culture and our context intimately just as Paul knew his.

In the United States in particular there has been what is dubbed a ‘culture war’ raging away for the past decade over such issues as opposing gay rights and abortion and promoting the teaching of “intelligent design” in schools along with evolution. The problem with the culture wars is that they end up using language and ideas that no longer are a part of the culture around them, and therefore are lost in translation. The danger also is that we become so

obsessed with one or two issues that we may wake up one day and find a whole generation gone from the church.

Therefore we must always look to identify that deep yearning in people’s hearts which even after 2000 years hasn’t changed. To me, it’s not about appealing to the need for consumerism or attempting to be relevant by flashing lights and rock’n roll. It is about graciously proclaiming the fact that God has always been in their midst, even though they may have forgotten him, he never forgets them.

We can do this act of proclaiming by getting to know people more deeply, spending time with those different to ourselves, hearing what they search for and offering them what God has made known to us. We must know our culture and always know what is fresh in the marketplace of new ideas, so that hopefully, by the grace of God, we can offer them the hope that is within us through creative and gracious means.

In our Gospel reading this morning Jesus encourages his disciples by telling them that the Spirit of Truth will abide in them. And so in turn Paul encourages the Athenians that ‘In him we live and move and have our being’. Our claims to exclusivity need not put others down, or demean their belief system, but rather it encourages us to find meeting points with people of other faiths or no faith.

Because ultimately our hope is that all people may one day replace that lonely altar, which I believe dwells in us all, so often obscured by our culture, which if brushed away would reveal the words ‘To Jesus Christ, the known God’ carved on to new hearts, for indeed, “he is not far from each one of us.”