

Easter Six: To a God Unknown and Known

St Paul addresses the people of Athens and says: “I see how extremely religious you are in every way ... for I found an altar with the inscription ‘To an unknown god’. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things ... for in him we live and move and have our being.”

It is a powerful and profound theological statement. And maybe one of the boldest pitches ever delivered by a missionary! Paul turns up in Athens in the centre of the Hellenistic empire and walks past all the statues – some of them several storeys high – in all the grand temples and says to the citizens of the most advanced and sophisticated city in the world at that time “I see that you too are a people who search for God and see everywhere the manifestations of the divine. I come with the good news that the God you seek to know can be known in new and intimate ways because he came among us as fellow human and has opened a new and living way to know God who you too can know.”

And then in the gospel according to John he continues to remind us that in Jesus we had the most complete manifestation of God and that because of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus and the giving of the Spirit that we too are included in the intimate life of God – that we are embraced in the family dance that is Father, Jesus and Spirit. And that as intimate participants in God we are to love as God loves.

Now these two portions of Scripture wouldn't have been heard side by side as we do this morning until the third century or more as the final decisions were being made about what letters and stories were to go in the bible and which ones weren't, as they were developed in quite separate Christian communities. But hearing them together as we do we have a wonderful opportunity to hold these two separate assertions: that there is a sense in which God is unknowable and mysterious and beyond name and labelling *and* that God is intimately knowable because of Jesus and our invitation into the heart of God.

If most of us reflect on our relationship with God that is true for us, I suspect. That God remains in some ways mysterious, unknowable, beyond our understanding and reach and that there are moments when we are wonderfully or terribly aware of the vast gulf between who and what we are and who and what God is. And it is also true, and I hope everyone

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here has experienced, that we can have a loving and intimate relationship with God which at moments has the easy intimacy of lovers, friends, parent and child, or companions on the journey.

And if it is true of our relationship with God how true is it of our relationships with each other? Even with our nearest and dearest who we know so well there are still layers of unfathomable mystery. And even more so those who are obviously different and distant from us. They are both recognisably like us and a mystery to us. We are, I believe, called to treat each other as such – as mysteries as eternally important as the divine from whose star dust we are created, and as neighbours like ourselves. Equally filled with hope, joy, anxiety, despair, desire, and struggle. Not exactly the same but equally strong and vulnerable, equally human, and equally made of the divine stuff of eternity.

And this deep respect and sensitivity is to be shown not only to those who are like us in culture and religion but to all of God's offspring. Paul's great gift to us, who live in a world even more multicultural and cosmopolitan than the one he entered into, is that we are to come into the centre of other world views and ways of life and honour their traditions and to find the place in their hearts and minds to share what we have come to know of the nature of God. To proclaim what we know of God and to allow that some of the mystery of the divine may have been revealed to others. To be respectful and curious, not fearful and denigrating. To be courageous and confident of the goodnews revealed to us and open to conversation with those who also long for the divine and grope toward the ultimate mystery. And even when our conversations stop short of agreement to recognise that we all live and move and have our being in the same Lord of creation, that we are all sons and daughters, offspring, of the same God.

Which is not to say that there are not real differences between different religions and philosophies or even that they are all equally good or right. We certainly do not need to be apologetic about our faith. Rather I think we are being encouraged to be humble and full of the hope given us, curious and confident in the love revealed, respectful and relevant. And when we cannot agree or see as others do – either between faiths and philosophies or between different theologies within the one faith - to remember that God, revealed to us in the person of Jesus, told us to love one another if we claim to love him. Love, not doctrine, is the gospel core.

Even so, come Lord Jesus Christ.