

## Reflection on Acts 17:22-31

Part of Paul's genius was that he was able to speak with people in a language they understood. He was able to connect with people where they were; able to link his message with people's experience. The reading we have just heard from Acts has Paul in Athens – a city with a proud history and tradition. People there enjoyed debating and talking; some say they were more keen on the talking than actually doing anything.

However Paul pays them a great compliment. He has walked around the city and seen the various altars and temples and idols – which would normally be an affront. But on this occasion he says: “I see you are very religious”, and “I found an altar with this inscription: 'to an unknown God'”. You worship this God, says Paul, yet you don't really know him. Please allow me to tell you about this God – and he does.

Sometimes we have been told that 'evangelism' – sharing the good news of love and life in Jesus Christ – is not so much telling people something, convincing them to accept something, holding out a different point of view. Rather it is to 'introduce them to the God they already know'. Helping them to recognise how God has been acting in their life, and in the world around them, and to see and acknowledge this for themselves.

This is what Paul was doing in Athens. He tells his audience they have taken the first step: recognising there is a God who is supremely important. However they know nothing about this God. Paul affirms their practice and experience and uses that as a starting point to lead them further. He spoke to them as if they knew, without knowing what they knew – pointing out this was the God they had been seeking in all their spiritual endeavours. The God who their earlier philosophers had glimpsed at times.

From *an* unknown God, Paul led them to *the* unknown God. This God's name and nature Paul would now reveal fully. He connects what he is saying with some of the Greek poets and philosophers who have gone before – in verses 27 and 28 he says: *God has done all this, so that we will look for him and reach out and find him. He isn't far from any of us, and he gives us the power to live, to move, and to be who we are. "We are his children," just as some of your poets have said.* (Acts 17:27-28)

Paul reinforces how this God he is telling them about is different; is in fact the real, the only, the one true God. This God is not someone or something that human beings have thought up and made. In fact this God is revealed in Jesus Christ.

Paul concludes by announcing the time for ignorance is at an end. He is not seeking to add a new god to the Athenian's collection, but to get them to repent and turn to the only true God. This is the God who forgives, commands, sets the day, judges the world and provides proof of the resurrection.

This is just as true today. Paul would encourage us to look for points of connection with the people and the culture that surrounds us, in order to reveal the one true God who is active in our midst.

## **“All My Hope on God is Founded”**

One of the things I do when I travel is collect interesting books. On my study leave last year I came across this book, *Then Sings My Soul: 40 Reflections on my favourite hymns* (show book). The author is Pam Rhodes who has presented the much loved British TV program “Songs of Praise” since 1987. Hymns, she explains, help us respond to God: they are “prayers in our pockets”. She describes how the hymns came to be written and considers what they have to tell us about God and our relationship to God and our life in response. This is some of what she writes about “All My Hope on God is Founded”

The village of Yattendon had become home to hymn-writer and Poet Laureate Robert Bridges, who'd retired there after a long career in medicine. Immersing himself in village life, he volunteered to become choirmaster in the little parish church, but soon found himself so frustrated at the poor quality of hymns available to him that he set about compiling *The Yattendon Hymnal*, a collection of his own new hymns, many of which were based on translations of inspirational texts from other languages.

The hymn *All My Hope on God is Founded*, was one of them, originally written back in the seventeenth century by Joachim Neander, a German pastor with independent and unorthodox opinions which had often got him into trouble before he died from tuberculosis at just thirty years old. Robert Bridges may well have had a good deal of sympathy with the outspoken, sensitive young man who had been a typically rowdy teenager until he went along with a group of friends to make trouble at a religious meeting - and found instead that his life was completely turned around. He became a scholar, and eventually the unordained Reformed Church rector at The Latin School in Dusseldorf, but his religious fervour infuriated the authorities, who insisted he sign a humiliating declaration promising to conform to accepted behaviour. The story goes that he went off to live for months in a cave, where he found consolation in God and nature, writing many of his finest hymn texts there.

Nowadays this hymn is often sung at services such as Remembrance, civic occasions or anniversaries, when we think back with thanks, relief and sometimes sadness over events of previous times, while looking forward in trust and hope to what the future might bring. In today's world, hope can be hard to find, especially where there is so much intolerance, greed and self-seeking, both in nations and individuals. This hymn, though, reminds us that whatever changes and challenges we're faced with, we can safely trust that God is always with us, whether the going is comfortable or filled with difficulty. He knows us, and because he knows our failings as well as our capabilities, we can trust him to guide us "through change and chance". If we're looking for hope, not just for now but forever, what better promise than that?

*Father God, we forget how little we can manage in our own strength,  
but it is at times when life is at its most hard  
that we need to remember your promise to us, through Christ.  
Our reassurance is in you and the knowledge of your constant presence  
in every moment, place, feeling and action.  
We can trust you, and in that trust we find all the hope and promise we need. Amen.*

## Reflection: Knowing God

I know that this is not everyone's experience. In fact while some things are indeed shared, everyone's experience of God has a personal, individual and unique aspect. However for me, I cannot remember a time when I didn't know God. As far back as I can remember I have always been aware that God was there, in my life and in my thoughts. An awareness of a comforting, encouraging, guiding presence that I would call a "Heavenly Father".

I guess I thought that was how it was for everyone. I was brought face to face with the reality that this was not so when I was 14. I attended a boys' high school and we had to eat our lunch as a class group in a designated area. One lunchtime one of my classmates asked, "Who believes in God?" Without thinking I blurted out, "I do", and was met with a hushed, incredulous, perhaps even contemptuous, silence. In that cold, clear, startling moment I realised that this "God thing" was not the same for everyone. For a long time after this experience I was very careful about what I said out loud about God, and who I said it to.

I came to understand that not everyone is prepared to or able to admit to any awareness of "God". I also came to understand that people can have very different experiences of God. However I am convinced that every person has some experience of God in their life. As I was talking with a friend the other day, she shared this insight: "we may really not know God, but God certainly knows us". And that makes all the difference.

In the verses we just heard from John's gospel Jesus says: "I will love you and show you what I am like" (14:21); and "I won't leave you as an orphan" (14:18). This has been my experience throughout my life. God is there and God is real. Though how this works out in each person's life can be very, very different.

A few weeks ago I introduced you to "a real bloke and God" - stories I had written about a 'real bloke' who has the experience of God bursting into his life. This bloke is not a regular church-goer, but he and the Lord have some interesting conversations and begin to develop quite a relationship. In regard to the theme of an "unknown God", here is the beginning of it all, titled "An Introduction of Sorts".

## AN INTRODUCTION OF SORTS

I was sitting in front of the TV, waiting for the interminable promos to be over and the game to begin. My wife, Patti, was outside in the garden. Brandon and Paul, our sons, were “helping” her – though I think they were getting more water on each other than the plants. I’d asked Patti to watch the game with me – but she said she wouldn’t enjoy it. She said she didn’t like listening to me criticise the referee, the players, the commentators; and that I wouldn’t appreciate her interrupting all the time with questions.

“No,” she’d said. “The boys and I will do our thing and let you enjoy the rugby without interruption.”

So I’d gathered all the supplies I’d need: a couple of beers, chips, crackers. For once we had a decent team and it looked like we had a chance of winning. It was okay watching on my own – but it was more fun with someone to throw comments at and have a bit of banter with. Problem was my mate Phil, who sometimes watched with me, was out of town. Shame – because we always had a great time, regardless of the game.

Never mind, it still promised to be a good afternoon ... relaxing in my favourite armchair with the big game about to begin. I reached down to grab a can ... when there was this voice from behind me: “What time’s kick off?”

“What. Who? That you Phil? Can’t be – you’re away.”

“No. It’s me,” said the voice.

I turned around, not recognising ... “Who the --- are you?”

“Ah,” was the response, “didn’t think you’d recognise me. But I know you. Know you by name. I’ve known you since you were being formed in your mother’s womb.”

Was this guy a weirdo or what!? I wondered how he’d managed to get past Patti. “Who, whe..., wha...” I tried to get out.

“You learned about me in Sunday School. You’ve called out to me a few times. You’ve seen me around – but only in glimpses. So I thought it’s time we got to know each other better.”

“Yeah. Great,” I replied with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. “Your voice is kind of familiar, but I just can’t place you ...”

“All right then,” was the reply, “let’s go back to the beginning. To the Bible. To Genesis: ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was barren, with no form of life; it was under a roaring ocean covered with darkness. But the Spirit of God was moving ...’ Ringing any bells yet?”

I shook my head. Truth told I wasn’t really concentrating – more interested in seeing what was happening on the telly.

So then he let me have it. Both barrels! His deep echoing voice boomed: “I am the Lord God, creator of all that is. I am your Heavenly Father. I am Jesus Christ Saviour and Redeemer. I am Holy Spirit; giver of life and truth. That’s me and here I am!”

Talk about over the top. You could have knocked me down with a feather ... God – the real thing – right here in my living room – if he was who he said he was. If!

I turned around and gave my full attention. “If you are who you say you are ...”

“Hey,” he shot back. “Like I’ve always said – and it’s in the Book – ‘I am who I am’.”

“If, and it’s a big if, you are who you say you are ... what are you doing here. I mean if you’re really the Lord God all-everything why bother with me. I mean who the heck am I?”

Quick as a flash the answer came. “You are one who is precious in my sight.”

I have to admit that certainly shut me up. I didn’t know what to say. So I just sat in silence and waited for the Lord, for that was surely who he was, to carry on.

“I want to get to know you – better,” the Lord continued. “And I especially want you to get to know me.”

I was still trying to come to terms with it. Imagine ... No. Not imagine. For real! The Lord God in *my* living room. “But, but, why me?” I blurted out.

“Because,” answered the Lord, “you’re an ordinary bloke. That’s who I’m here for. Mind if I sit down?”

“Yes. Uh, no. I mean, sure. Go ahead.”

So the Lord sat down in the armchair next to mine. “Like I asked before, what time’s kick off?”

“Two o’clock,” I told him. “Just a couple of minutes to go.” I offered him a beer, and a packet of chips.

“No thanks,” he said. “I’m fine.”

Next thing the teams ran out on to the field. Our guys did their traditional haka. “Sends shivers down your spine doesn’t it!” remarked the Lord.

“Sure does,” I replied.

The ref blew his whistle and from the kick off you could tell it was going to be one of those great games. I was really pleased to have someone to share it with too. I did my usual cheering and yelling.

The Lord really got into it too. Cheering. Yelling. Leaping up and down. The thing was – he cheered for both teams. He was just as ecstatic when they scored as when we did. And he stuck up for the ref too. Even though he was so one-eyed it’s a wonder he could run straight.

I challenged the Lord about this. I guess you’re not really supposed to challenge the Lord about anything. But this was important. This was rugby. “How can you cheer for them as well as us?” I confronted him.

The Lord smiled and gave that chuckle I was beginning to get wary of. “It’s just the way I am,” he said. “I can’t take sides. I just enjoy the game. I’m with one of your previous captains whose line seemed to be: ‘rugby was the winner on the day’.”

“It’s obvious you’ve never watched from the stands or on the bank in the middle of a crowd. With that kind of attitude they’d have you!”

He chuckled again. “Yeah. That’s happened to me before – in a big way. Remind me to tell you about it sometime.”

It was almost too much for a bloke to take on board. I shook my head. Fancy me watching the big match with the Lord God. Wouldn’t that make a great story to tell down the pub! Only – who’d believe me!!!

“Hey,” I said, turning to the Lord. “Do you know who wins?”

“Now that would be telling!” he replied.

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