

Known Unknowns

A message from the vicar

13 August 2020

Our current sermon series called “Viral – good news spreads fast” leads us on to look at Acts 17 again this week. From verse 23 we see the apostle Paul in the great city of Athens in the 1st Century.

As he moved about the central *agora*, or marketplace, Paul was struck by a city swamped with gods. It worried him greatly that people there didn’t know the Good News he knew about Jesus Christ.

As he moved around, Paul found one religious stall in the market with an “altar to the ‘unknown god’”.

Don Richardson, an author, researched this passage in Acts last century and wrote about an ancient story known by Greeks and Romans in those days. It was a tale about Epimenides, a revered philosopher and poet. Paul actually quotes this same Epimenides in his speech to the thinkers at Athens later in the passage, in verse 28.

As a possible background to this reference to “the unknown god” among all the idols of worship in Athens, Richardson retells the story, writing:

“... there was a great plague in Greece and nothing the philosophers or astrologers or the gods could do put a stop to the plague. Epimenides however, told the people of Crete to sacrifice to the “unknown god” and the plague would be exorcised. He told them to go out early in the morning in a particular field of sheep. Where there was a sheep which lay down, they were to sacrifice the animal and make an altar there. The plague disappeared from the land after this and Epimenides’ “unknown god” was revered amongst the Greek and Roman idols.”

In times of great challenge, like when a pandemic is at its height, our worldview and the worldview of our neighbours is seriously tested.

In every generation, all philosophies and religions have had to answer four common questions:

1. Where do we come from? In other words, our origins.
2. What are we here for? That is, what purpose does the human race have? And, for that matter, what purpose do I have, if any?
3. How should we live? This question searches for a set of ethics keeps us safe and thriving?
4. Where are we going? That is, what is the destiny of humanity? Of me?

Every system of thought down the ages stands or falls on its respective answers to these questions, whether we are conscious of asking them or not.

On Sunday I will talk about how the Apostle Paul shared the Gospel with these questions in mind when he talked with the thinkers in that iconic city that was once the home of Aristotle, Socrates and Plato.

Before Sunday, maybe you can have a think about **how your faith in Christ informs** those questions that are common to all humanity. And while you’re at it, have a think about how your friend or neighbour might answer any four of those questions.

As I'll make clear on Sunday, Paul new it was important to understand and have empathy with those he was in dialogue with about important matters of life. I hope this Sunday's message will help you to understand and relate your hope in life with others you care about.

God bless you this week ahead.

Steve Webster