



SERMONS

by

Anthony Baateng

Date: 21st May 2017 Training Preacher: Anthony Boateng

Bible readings: Acts 17:22-31 and John 14:15-21

Key aim: 1) Exploring Paul's reaction in Athens 2) Exploring our response to the resurrection

Title: "Making the Unknown God Known"

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, your word says that the words that come from our mouths are spirit and they come with power. This morning, we ask that your word will come with authority to feed our spirits. May the words of my lips and thoughts be filled with your wisdom in Jesus' name. **Amen.**

According to research on the significance of Easter published in 2011, 57% of people said they believed that Jesus was executed by crucifixion, buried, and rose from the dead, with over half of those (30%) accepting the traditional Christian belief in the bodily resurrection of Christ and the rest (27%) believing that Jesus rose in spirit form. So, we have a job to do because while the majority of people in Britain do believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus, many remain confused about how Jesus resurrected.

Let's turn our attention to the book of Acts 17:22-31, which we heard read earlier. Paul travels to Athens on a soul-seeking mission from Berea, where he had been chased out by the crowds and forced to momentarily leave behind Silas and Timothy. He knew beforehand that Athens was a city with rich culture and the home to many philosophers such as Epicureans and Stoics.

The Epicureans were atheists, and their goal in life was pleasure, which meant for them refined tranquillity, free from pain and anxiety. On the other hand, the Stoics believed God was in everything, and they emphasized personal discipline and self-control.

It is right to say that both the Epicureans and the Stoics were seeking knowledge about the world around them and something higher to believe in. Some had a feeling that AN UNKNOWN God was behind it all but had not yet had a revelation that helped them to understand that.

"While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols." (Acts 17:16).

So what did Paul see? As expected, he saw philosophers applying their teaching, full of buildings and monuments that were unparalleled, but the fact that it was nourished by idolatry broke his heart! It remained for Paul to explain how they could enter life through the Lord Jesus Christ.

So what does Paul seek to do? He attempts to make the Unknown god known by affirming that God has revealed Himself fully and finally in Jesus Christ and He does not live in buildings made by human hands.

Paul said, *"People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you. "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands."* (Acts 17:22-24)

Like most people today, they would say, "We all worship the same God". But the fact is there is only one way to God which is through Jesus Christ. Paul underlines their ignorance by using their inscription of AN UNKNOWN god altar to highlight a gap in their knowledge and uses the phrase very religious sarcastically. The Athenians had reduced God to minerals, precious stones, and restricted

God to buildings. They loved their buildings and materials more than they loved God. Paul found it absurd to imagine the Infinite Creator God would be restricted to live in manmade Temples.

So how does this relate to us? I was shocked when I first read the Unified statement of Connexional Finance and discovered that despite the noticeable decline in membership all over the country, the church income stands at 44 million pounds (nearly 3M increase on the year before). With a net income of nearly 6 million - almost 4M increase. We can't be lovers of money and lovers of God, right? I felt motivated when I heard Revd Tim Swindell, the lead Connexional Treasurer Say, "Bigger barns will not save us" during his presentation at last year's conference.

I wholeheartedly agree with this statement because like Tim, I believe we can have all the beautiful new buildings and bigger account balances but if we don't make THE UNKNOWN GOD KNOWN in our community and win souls then we've failed our church mandate. My question is how are we investing to share the good news of Jesus with our community?

Brothers and sisters, let me say this. We can't build the Kingdom while sitting in the church debating about property management or we dim our light. And if we are to lay a foundation in our community, then we have to make the first move and reach out to unbelievers, seek the lost, or we risk having empty nice buildings and making our God UNKNOWN. How wonderful would it be to be known as an innovative outward-looking church that helps people find healing and know Christ through the power of the resurrection, eh?

So how can we talk about Jesus and the resurrection? Brothers and Sisters, I believe we need to help people to know and acknowledge that Jesus has brought heaven down to us, His Spirit (Love) is close, and calls us to turn away from sin and live in His suffering in order to experience Him intimately like never before. And we do this recognizing that sometimes some will feel uncomfortable about the message of Jesus' resurrection because of its mystery and it surpasses our logic.

I know this because through my loneliest and darkest times (when I feel lost, broken, deeply depressed, or in tears due to massive setbacks), when I've felt the full force of the wind and in the most joyful times in my life, I know Jesus has and is always around, by my side even when I've questioned Him like Job in his suffering. He's never left me, even when I stopped believing or questioned my calling because I felt forsaken by Him.

When I feel ready to give up hope, His love through the power of the Holy Spirit finds a way to heal me, refine me, strengthen me progressively, and reminds me of the call to live in His suffering. Following and believing in Jesus has been the hardest as well as the bedrock of my life and it is what keeps me going in life when all seems lost.

In our gospel reading by John, Jesus promises the Holy Spirit to those who love Him. Jesus has assured us that in the midst of our struggles, we will receive the Holy Spirit because of the resurrection, and this experience will lead to deepening the love that lies in us.

So how do we respond? Last time I was here, I made reference to Amos 5: 18-24 and urged us to seek to live justly and righteously; love and honour God in every way so that the Holy Spirit will pour out to those around us; delight in doing the most ordinary things of our lives – serving others. This morning, brothers and sisters, I will challenge us further to keep in mind and remind other people to keep searching for the heavenly things, and to learn what it is to find His love like our Founder John Wesley did. Remember that Jesus' glory is evident everywhere and in everything we do if we look close enough.

On the anniversary of John Wesley, I like to remind you that for years he sought to work out his own salvation – through methodical application to Bible-reading, prayer, and good works to the needy (work of piety and work of mercy) and through becoming a missionary in North America – but none of this gave him the assurance of God’s love and of his salvation.

He encountered many challenges in his life, in his mission, and in the Church of England, but none of this stopped him even though He was yet to experience salvation. It was only on 24th May 1728 that he felt he trusted in Jesus Christ and was given an assurance that he had been saved from the law of sin and death as testified in the well-known hymn "And Can It Be."

The Holy Spirit/UNKNOWN GOD that Paul speaks about is personal, beyond reach yet close, intimate, dwelling in us, calling us into action, and when two or more meet and trust Christ as their savior, His presence is with them. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God continues to be made known to the world not in our buildings and worldly possessions but through the activity of the Holy Spirit, which is revealed in our actions, our service, our response to suffering, and our relationships.

In the past, in God’s mercy, despite being aware of our sins, He did not punish as we deserved. Now everything is different because of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. A total change of our hearts and minds (Repentance) are commanded when we come into contact with the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the love of God is declared to us. We are commanded by God to turn away from sin and turn in faith to Him.

I recently saw statistics that suggest a significant decline in attendance and membership in the Methodist Church all across the country. And in general, UK church membership has declined from 10.6 million in 1930 to 5.5 Million in 2010, and still declining. It leaves one to wonder about the future of our church and makes it even more important that we focus on revealing the nature of the unknown God rather than on buildings. This calls us to live our Christian life more fully wherever we are.

“When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.” Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them were Dionysius and also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.” (Acts 17:32-34)

May Jesus' glory inspire us this morning to reach out to our community to make the gospel known as we bathe in the glow of the resurrection today, and to know you in your suffering and to become like you. Like Paul, may God make us passionate for His glory in our church and community? **Amen.**