

## Unknown God

*Acts 17:22-31; John 11:15-21*

Known unto God is a phrase used on gravestones of unknown soldiers in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemeteries. It was selected by the poet Rudyard Kipling when he worked for the Imperial War Graves Commission, and may have some precedent in the King James Version of the Bible. Kipling's only son John went missing presumed killed in action at the Battle of Loos in 1915 and it weighed heavily on his father that the grave was never found. It was eventually located in 1992.

In discussing memorials to those missing with no known grave he said "[t]his matter is naturally of the deepest concern to the relatives of those whose bodies have never been recovered or identified, or whose graves, once made, have been destroyed by later battles", and when the ongoing funding of the war graves commission was discussed in parliament he was quick to defend it stating, "our boy was missing at Loos. The ground is of course battered and mined past all hope of any trace being recovered. I wish some of the people who are making this trouble realised how more than fortunate they are to have a name on a headstone in a known place."

At the west end of the Nave of Westminster Abbey is the grave of the Unknown Warrior whose body was brought from France to be buried there on 11<sup>th</sup> November 1920. The grave contains soil from France and has the inscription:

*Beneath this stone rests the body of a British warrior, unknown by name or rank; brought from France to lie among the most illustrious of the land...Thus are commemorated the many multitudes who during the Great War...gave the most that man can give – life itself...for the sacred cause of justice and the freedom of the world. They buried Him among the kings because he had done good toward God and toward His house.*

Around the main inscription are four texts:

*The Lord knoweth them that are His.*

*Greater love hath no man than this.*

*Unknown and yet well known, dying and behold we live.*

*In Christ shall all be made alive."*

We mark where our dead lie. In cemeteries, in churches, or in some private, special place that we can go to and remember them. We scatter ashes, or plant trees, or dedicate benches, or do something that enables us, in their memory, to make some kind of thumbprint on the mind, the history, the geography of our time so that those we loved will not be forgotten but remembered. At our Remembering Service a few weeks ago, and at the Blue Christmas Service, we have our remembering tree and I encourage people to come and write the names of loved ones, amongst other things, on stars that we hang on the remembering tree.

On Remembrance Sunday we pay special attention to our war memorials, the wall plaques and the Book of Remembrance, to remind ourselves that these aren't just pieces of furniture, these are part of the fabric of remembering that is a part of the lived life of our church. This morning, out of all the names recorded there, one, Jean Scougall, was brought to our attention, and we remember her name, and look at all those others, knowing them to be the sons, daughters, brothers, husbands, uncles and grandchildren of people who sat in buildings like this in Morningside. We may not know much about them, but we have their names. It is beyond emotional to know that on those memorials, and on some of the windows around the building, people once sat who knew the names, and the person behind them.

It is strange, therefore, to read the Bible story from Acts, about Paul in Athens. He is at the Areopagus, a stone outcrop not far from the Acropolis. The council would meet there, and it was a place of judgement and public discourse. The Athenians were a superstitious people, "religious in every way", Paul says. To make sure they had covered all bases, and not wanting to offend any deity they had not come across, they had erected an altar, 'to an unknown god.'

Perhaps they were sophisticated enough to realise that there might be gods or dimensions of deity that would extend beyond the human capacity to know.<sup>i</sup> Hedge your bets, just in case.

The Apostle Paul seized on this. He may have felt some anxiety having just been run out of town in other parts of Greece. Athens was new territory for him, a university town, a great seat of learning, sophisticated philosophising, and religious curiosity. But he knew an opportunity when he saw one. Here were people curious about the Unknown God, and susceptible to what could be told. This God was not unknown. He told the story of the God of Israel, shaping and imagining worlds and universe. He told of humanity's endless searching and questing for truth and meaning and understanding, and being confronted, time and again, by this God-shaped experience Who spoke of hope, and forgiveness, and connection, and presence. This God Who is to be experienced, not made, not controlled, not trapped in images of gold and silver, or enshrined in temples of stone. He spoke of a God Who moved amongst the people of the world. He spoke of Jesus.

Paul knew this Jesus. Paul knew that so many in life, then and now, grope for meaning, for certainty, for something, someone, upon Whom to pin their hope. Someone to fill the God-shaped gap in their lives. This God is not unknown. This God is in Christ. This God is Jesus. This God Who lived and died and rose again from the dead to bring a sign of hope.

Too much? Certainly the Athenians, like the Jews before them, struggled. But Paul tells it like it is for him. It was a bold witness to what Paul believed was God's final answer to the world. But there it is. Unashamed, unvarnished, and leading us to its rejection, or its acceptance. Paul did not water down his message, becoming lukewarm in his commitment to Jesus. He asserted it boldly. This is what he believed. He could not say anything else. For Paul revelation takes us to the place of belief where observation sometimes draw short. The growth of grass is more than simply biological cells

dividing. The sky is more than masses of matter and swirling gas. Natural theology takes us so far, there is a need, in the realm of faith, to find a springboard that takes us upwards, onwards, into a world where reality is hard to grasp, but can be apprehended through our senses – this beyond – this far country – is the place where God is, and from whence God reaches out in poetry, in art, in music to touch those mystical, spiritual parts of our lives.

It's what we hear when the trumpeter plays the Last Post from that gallery on Remembrance Sunday. It's what we feel on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day when we sing, "Lo, Lord we greet Thee, born this happy morning", or on Easter when we carol, 'Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son'. It's what we feel when a child gathers the offering. It's what we feel when we witness a baptism, or the marriage of loved ones. It's what I felt last week at the sixth of the nine funerals, wondering if I could feel anything at all, but somehow in the sharing of a person's life, and telling some of the story, the words, the congregation, the remembering lifted us all far above the coffin and the loss, and into the happy place of memory and celebrating.

All of these things, says Paul, and so much more, is what unmasks the Unknown God. Here are the experiences of the divine reaching down and kissing the earth with a fleeting meaning and truth that lifts us up and beyond. No equation will prove it. No experiment will strip down the component parts. Sometimes not even descriptive words will encapsulate it all. But something, somehow, reaches, touches and transforms us. And the Unknown God becomes known. Even if only for a fleeting moment. And it's *real*.

Two millennia later our C21st world in all its plurality represents that Athenian pantheon. People make gods of everything. But people are still searching, and questioning, and wondering. The greatest challenge to the Church, or one of them at any rate, is not just to tackle the issue that for so many people what we do is irrelevant to their lives. It is to say to them, show to them, humbly

and respectfully, "I know your hunger, I know your thirst, for meaning, relevance, hope, peace, forgiveness, welcome. This is what we find in Church. This is what we have found in Jesus, and how we relate to Him, and what He did, and how He changed us, and the world in which we live." God does not deserve to be unknown any longer. How job, like Paul, is to speak and live the good news. And maybe, just maybe, someone will listen, someone will see, someone will believe.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

---

<sup>i</sup> Randle R Mixon, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 2, p472