

Missions Sunday: Making the unknown God known

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[0 : 00] Well, we need to depend on God for his help to understand his word. So let us pray. Heavenly Father, would you feed us from your word once again?

Help us to be empowered by it, to be motivated by it indeed, and to really listen to it today. Give us soft hearts, ready to marvel at how you are the one true God of the entire universe all over again. All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. There's a good reason why the current era is often called the information age. We live in a time where just about anything can be googled. What recommended restaurants are nearby? Where the green tea has caffeine? What are the early signs of pregnancy? Incidentally, those are some of the top 100 questions that was asked on Google in 2019.

But a number of years ago, some researchers from Carnegie Mellon University discovered that although we now have so much information on our fingertips, we don't use much of it.

[1 : 11] In fact, we often prefer to avoid it. The researchers discovered that if there was information which could help a person make better decisions, but was painful to learn or receive, many times the people preferred to remain ignorant.

So, a dieter might prefer not to know how many calories was in the dessert that they just had. A person at high risk for certain diseases might prefer not to undergo that health screening.

A friend might prefer not to know whether or not I enjoyed the book she gave me. And the researchers found that it doesn't matter who you are.

Whatever your gender or age, whatever your political ideology, whatever your level of education, everyone engaged in information avoidance of some sort.

In our passage this morning, Paul is in Athens.

[2 : 14] And Athens seems like a place that's the exact opposite of ignorance. In the ancient world, it was probably more associated with enlightenment. Think about it.

It's the place of culture. This, after all, was home to famous playwrights like Sophocles, whose plays still lay the foundation of modern theatre.

Or think of Aristotle, who first conceptualised the three-act structure that still forms the basis of many of the movies you watch today. The setup, the confrontation, and the resolution.

And of course, there were buildings like the magnificent Parthenon, a spectacular temple, an architectural wonder. Moreover, it's the place of knowledge.

All the major schools of philosophy were represented there. Indeed, the history of Western philosophy has been famously described as simply a series of footnotes to Plato.

[3 : 17] In other words, Plato was basically the guy, along with his fellow Greeks, Socrates and Aristotle, who laid down the foundation of philosophy as a discipline.

Everything that comes after that is just building on that foundation. And it's the place of politics. Athens is the birthplace of democracy, where the right to vote was first given expression.

It was certainly not a place you would ever deem ignorant. And yet, when Paul stands up in the meeting of the Areopagus, the most public and esteemed of the forums available to him in that city, he makes one thing clear to the Athenians.

You are ignorant. Notice that's what frames his speech. Verse 23, You are ignorant of the very thing you worship.

And then down in verse 30, In the past, God overlooked such ignorance. So it's clear what Paul thinks is the issue.

[4 : 26] They're ignorant. But how can it be? We've just established that Athens was a great place of learning, a leading place of culture, the very birthplace of modern politics.

Furthermore, it was a place of great diversity, a melting pot of ideas and customs and religions, exactly the kind of place many of us would value today. But Paul says, Yes, yes, yes, but for all your sophistication, one basic underlying problem remains. You do not know God.

You do not know God. You are deliberately ignorant of him. And 2,000 years later, isn't it still the same?

We live in a society where we've never been more aware of our cultural diversity, whether in our nation or in the world. Because I have young kids, I don't make it to the many What About Kuching events that have been held over the last couple of years.

[5 : 32] But I have at least been to the photography exhibits at Padang Merdeka, and I'm so amazed at the variety of settings and heritages that those photographs capture.

We also live in a world where education is a top priority. We want to grow in knowledge, and we want our kids to grow to be knowledgeable doctors and scientists and economists.

And of course, we still have a long way to go, but I don't think anyone would disagree that when compared to 50 years ago, Malaysians are more educated overall.

And our political consciousness is heightened like never before GE14 is proof of that. So there is a sense it's laughable to say we have remained in ignorance.

And yet for all the advances we have made, the same basic problem remains. The world does not know God.

[6 : 33] The world is deliberately ignorant of Him. And so here's the question the scriptures poses of us today. If the world does not know God, what should be our response?

If the world remains ignorant of Him, what action should we take? Today's passage will help us to see three reactions we should have. Firstly, distress when the world does not know God.

Paul is in Athens, but he's no tourist taking in all the sights. He would have seen the Parthenon and the Acropolis, but he's not overawed by them.

For long before he had seen those, he would have seen something else, on every street, in every corner. Before he even entered the city, he would have taken in the sight of a huge statue of Athena from his ship, or an Aphrodite sanctuary, or images of Zeus, depending on which harbour he landed at.

And once he walked through the city, he could see shrines, statues, pillars, temples, gymnasiums, all dedicated to this or that particular God.

[7 : 56] As verse 16 puts it, the city was full of idols, it was overflowing with them. And notice Paul's reaction, verse 16. He was greatly distressed.

He was disturbed. He was bothered. He found their presence greatly provocative. He felt great distress that worship, which should have been directed to the most worthy, most honourable, the most kind-hearted, and the most generous being in the entire universe, was being directed somewhere else. I wonder, what do we see when we look at our city? What do we notice when we look at another country, and I don't mean the tourist attractions?

Perhaps we see a great place to raise a family. Perhaps we see a great place to earn the most money. Perhaps we see a great place to seek our own autonomy.

economy. That's what we usually see. That's why we often pack up or stay put. But do we look a little closer and see what rules our city or that country?

[9 : 11] We might not literally see statues on every corner, but can we see what our city or that country worships? Is it family? Money?

Autonomy? Or tree? Something else? Listen in to what they talk about in the coffee shops, or see what events they promote. Are they worshipping something other than God?

And here's the key thing. Does that trouble us? Does it make us distressed if we know that Kuching is captivated by a love of something other than God?

Do we feel heart ache when we look beyond Kuching to a place like Japan where 99% of the population that's over 100 million people do not give glory to God?

What about the Bania people in India who number 29 million and worship many many gods but who, as far as I know, do not have a single Christian amongst them?

[10 : 19] What about the Bible belt in the United States where many people go to church every Sunday but do not actually know Jesus or read their Bibles but worship a form of nationalistic religion instead?

Are we distressed? You see, ultimately, why don't people know God? Why are they ignorant of Him? the Bible's answer is idolatry.

As Paul writes in another letter to another group of Christians in another great city, Rome, people suppress the truth about God and exchange the glory of the immortal God for idols instead. Idolatry and ignorance go hand in hand. We see this in verse 18 after Paul had begun telling people about Jesus. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, what is this babbler trying to say? Others remark, he seems to be advocating foreign gods. His audience cannot make head or tails of what Paul is trying to say.

[11 : 36] They dismiss him as a rather terrible salesman who cannot even describe his religious product coherently. Or they think of him as a spreader of propaganda for his favourite gods.

Somehow or other, they seem to think that he was promoting at least two gods. And so, ironically, their ignorance leads them to think of Paul as the ignorant one.

And that's why, verse 20, the gospel becomes a strange idea whose meaning eludes them. They are blind. They have suppressed the truth.

Now, although they are curious and they bring Paul to a meeting of the Areopagus, verse 19, they are not actually sincere seekers wanting to know the one true God.

Rather, they just like to talk and talk. As the writer of Acts, Luke observes in verse 21, all the Athenians and the foreigners who live there spend their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.

[12 : 51] It's rather fitting that they now hear Paul in the Areopagus, which used to be a trial court, although by that time it wasn't used for that purpose. The people wanted to judge Paul's message and declare whether it's acceptable or not.

Ironically, again, in their ignorance, they see themselves as the enlightened ones. They are the ones who can say whether this message is good or not.

And this is what idolatry does. It completely distorts your vision and makes you think that you are in charge and you are in control. And that's why Paul is distressed.

That's why Paul is going to speak up. Because, number one, he is compassionate for those living in darkness. And number two, he is zealous for God's glory.

I wonder, why do you share the good news about Jesus? Or why should you share the good news of Jesus? Some of us share out of bad reasons.

[13 : 59] we share out of guilt. Every week the pastor keeps scolding us, so I guess we better appease him and keep him quiet for a while. It becomes all about completing things on a checklist so that we won't be characterized as a bad Christian.

Some of us share out of pride. That is, we share because we believe that somehow we or the religion we profess in is somehow morally superior to that of the other religions.

So we share simply to showcase our superiority. But Paul wants to show us a better way. He looks at all the people around him in Athens and he is genuinely distressed because he sees that they are prisoners to their idols, hostages, captives.

Like his master Jesus, he has compassion on them because he sees they are like sheep without a shepherd. But more than that, he is zealous for God's glory.

He says, I want people to know Jesus and worship Jesus because ultimately, Jesus deserves it. Henry Martin was a 19th century missionary who died at age 31, having given up a brilliant academic career to take the gospel to India and to modern-day Iran.

[15 : 32] Why did he do so? He famously said these words, I could not endure existence if Jesus were to be always thus dishonoured.

I could not endure existence if Jesus were to be always thus dishonoured. reflecting on his words in the 20th century, the pastor John Stott said this, I never read these words of Martin's without being rebuked, for I do not have this passionate love for Christ's honour or feel this acute pain.

And I think most of us can resonate with what John Stott said. But John Stott also goes on to say, but is not this the cause of our guilty silence?

The fact that we do not prioritise God's glory enough? And so when we see a world that does not know God, let's pray for the heart of Paul, let's pray for the heart of Henry Martin, let's pray against apathy, but ask for a godly distress, to warm my cold heart, to make it deeply personal to us, and one that would move us to action.

And this brings us to the second reaction this passage wants us to have. Secondly, desire to make the unknown God known.

[17:10] To make the unknown God known. Paul wasn't content to wash his hands off Athens, leaving them in their idolatry. He didn't just want to stand at a distance making dispassionate observations.

No, he wanted very much to be a part of the solution. So look again at what he does. In verse 17, he reasons in the synagogue and in the marketplace.

In verse 18, he's ready to debate the intellectuals of his day. And in verse 19, he preaches the good news about Jesus and his resurrection.

Whether Jew or Greek, whether peasant or philosopher, whether Epicurean or Stoic, he went to them. There is no cancel culture at work here.

Rather, Paul was willing to cross cultures to gain a hearing for the gospel. And having now been given an opportunity to speak in a public forum, verse 22, he stands up and says this, People of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious.

[18:27] For as I walk around and look carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription, To an unknown God.

what Paul does here is to give us a little masterclass in evangelism. The first thing he does is to establish an initial point of contact.

To build some rapport, he appeals to their deep sense of devotion. You are very religious. You are very devout. In doing so, Paul isn't engaging in flattery.

He isn't complimenting the objects of their devotion. For as we have already seen, he was greatly distressed by them. He isn't even saying that it's a good thing to be religious in the way the Athenians were.

The first Christian readers of Acts 17 would probably have understood Paul to be hinting that the Athenians were superstitious. And so this is not sweet talk.

[19:33] Paul is simply making a statement of fact as a form of bridge building. He wants to connect without necessarily endorsing their overall belief system.

And having begun building the bridge, Paul singles out one object of their devotion among the many he encountered. He says, I see you even have an altar to an unknown god.

By doing so, Paul confirms the truth of his prior statement. The Athenians indeed were very religious. Only religious people would have monuments to a god they don't even know.

But by choosing this particular altar amongst the many he could have chosen, Paul also confirms at the same time their ignorance.

From within their own cultural environment, Paul is able to highlight their basic problem. They don't know the true god at all.

[20:41] He builds rapport and connection, but he also shows them their fundamental problem. He shows them the big difference between himself and them.

For, verse 23 again, what they do not know, Paul knows. What they do not know, Paul knows. Paul isn't saying that the Athenians were always believers without realizing it, as some modern liberal theologians have claimed.

He's saying that they are worshipping the wrong thing. And so that's why he's going to fill in the gaps. That's why he's going to tell them about the true god. And that's why he's going to proclaim the gospel to them.

If you like, Paul doesn't just connect, he corrects. Now that's important for us to know because whenever we share the gospel with others, we tend to lean one way or the other, don't we?

Many of us are all about connection and finding as much common ground as possible. And if we are seeking to persuade, well, it is right to do so.

[21:53] we must do this work. And thankfully, we can do this work. After all, regardless of background, our ethnic background or our culture, we are all still human beings who deep down within us know that God exists and we are accountable to him.

The danger is, however, in finding connection, we might sometimes flatten out the differences between the belief systems and in the end, we fail to actually proclaim our unique gospel and to call out idolatry as wrong.

On the other hand, a number of us think of sharing the gospel only as correction. We are so eager to show people where they are wrong and where right, we forget to do the hard work of getting to

know people as people.

We forget to do the hard work of making sure that our message would be truly heard rather than just become a stream of meaningless information that people don't get.

We will see Paul model this kind of connection for us later on. But as any experienced missionary would tell you, whenever we seek to make the unknown God known, we need to do both.

[23 : 17] We combine cultural sensitivity with a refusal to compromise. We let the gospel connect and correct. But what does Paul proclaim?

He wants to proclaim the one big story which is true of every human being on this earth wherever they are from. He wants to proclaim the one big story of which Jesus and the resurrection is the climax.

He wants to proclaim the one big story that will help anyone of any culture understand their own mini stories. And this one big story consists of one main character, the one true God.

And this is what we discover about him. Number one, the one true God is the creator. Verse 24.

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 human hands.

Everybody, Paul says, was made by this one true God. And so everyone is connected to him in this way. If he alone is creator, he is relevant to everyone, everywhere.

[24 : 38] He can't be chopped up into little gods who only have jurisdiction over certain geographical areas or certain spheres of life.

It's not as if if you live in the Middle East, only a certain God can claim rights over your life. Or if you live in India, another God can do the same thing. There is only one true God, the Lord of heavens and the earth.

And so that's why everybody needs to hear about him. This is actually the basis for world missions. If there is only one God who deserves to be worshipped, everyone in the world is called to worship him without exception.

And he cannot be confined and controlled by those whom he has created. God cannot be manipulated by offerings in the temple, as if he's a dog who will be satisfied with a juicy bone offered to him.

His glory cannot stay in any temple, whether Jewish or Greek. His glory must fill the earth. Number two, this one true God is the sustainer, verse 25.

[25 : 58] And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.

This is a God who is not just too big for temples, that he doesn't even need them. In fact, he doesn't need anything from us. He could have not created the universe at all, and he himself would remain unchanged.

He certainly did not create because he was distressed or feeling like he was lacking something. Instead, God created because he wanted to share his love and life with creatures.

While the Athenians thought that religion was all about creating images of God, the Bible tells us that God was creating us in his image.

And as his creatures, we are completely dependent on him. It doesn't matter whether you're a highly educated Greek philosopher or just a Gentile hawker in the marketplace.

[27 : 03] It doesn't matter if you are the president of the United States or an African beggar in Mozambique. We are all made in God's image, and we are completely dependent on him.

He breathes life into us. He sustains us. But in his purposes, this is a wonderful thing, not a terrible thing. Because as we depend on him, we are actually experiencing his love and life.

Now, what a big difference this would also have been to the Epicureans and the Stoics listening in. Epicureans accepted the existence of many gods, but they believed that none of them took any interest in human affairs at all.

Nature operated independently of the gods. Stoics, on the other hand, had no real conception of a personal god.

seeing god as simply the world soul. I suppose in modern day terms, they would have called god mother nature. Idols are always impersonal.

[28 : 14] But god is personal. That's what Paul wants the Athenians to know. God is personal. In other words, he's knowable.

You see, many people still believe in some variation of the epicurean or stoic belief today, don't they? If god exists, many people think of him as far up there and not down here.

And it's interesting how during this pandemic, many people said things like, mother nature is teaching us a lesson, rather than god is teaching us a lesson.

To many people, god is just a concept, an impersonal or a semi-personal thing. Not a person who can be known and related to and trusted and loved.

But Paul says Christianity tells you differently. And this personal god is interested in people. He isn't just interested in the sun and the stars and the skies.

[29 : 24] He's interested in people. Look at the next point Paul makes. Number three, the one true god is sovereign.

Verse 26, from one man, he made all the nations that they should inhabit the whole earth, and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.

Paul is saying that God has arranged the entire course of history from the beginning of time. He was behind your great-grandfather moving from wherever to arrive in the land of Sarawak.

He moved the huts of Hudson Southwell and Frank Davidson and Kerry Tolley when they boarded an old cargo steamer in 1928, bound for Singapore, so that they would come to Boneyo to bring the gospel.

He was the reason that Sabah and Sarawak joined with Malaya to become the nation of Malaysia in 1963. God cuts across historical eras and national boundaries, and he does so all for one reason.

[30 : 40] Verse 27, God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.

The Stoics would have agreed that God is not far from any of us, since they thought of God as being part of creation. But Paul is saying something more radical.

He's saying the one true God, who is not a part of creation, he is the creator after all, still wants to get to know you.

He ordered everything sovereignly for you to hear the gospel. Somehow, in some way, all those events, your ancestors' movements, the movements of our BEM founding missionaries, the movement for Malaysia to become a nation, were all so that you could know him.

After all, if you seek God on your own, you will not succeed. At best, it causes you to create an altar to an unknown God.

[31 : 58] But it's a different story if God made sure certain events happened so that someone will come and make him known to you. And now God could be preparing you to make a difference in someone else's story.

If you come into contact and have an opportunity to share the gospel with someone else, whatever their background, that is never an accident.

God is using you. After all, verse 28, we are all in one sense God's offspring. Once again, Paul finds a point of contact with his hearers.

He says, even your own poets affirm this, we are God's offspring. And so everything I've just said makes sense even from within your own culture.

You see, if it's true that we are God's offspring, Paul says to the Athenians, they would be only one point of origin, the creator God. God, and he would be personal, since just as a father would want to know his offspring, so does God.

[33 : 14] And if we are God's offspring, then it must be true that your idols cannot be God's, for how can an idol of gold or silver produce living, breathing offspring?

That's the logic of verse 29. after all, verse 28, it is in God we live and move and have our being.

And so do you see how Paul makes the unknown God known? He connects and he corrects. He's not afraid to tell the Bible's big story.

And as he does so, he shows Athens how their own story only truly makes sense from the biblical point of view. he confronts them with their ignorance while pointing them to the truth of God's revelation.

And my friends, when the world does not know God, this is exactly what we must do. We must help people see how only the Bible can explain reality satisfactorily.

[34 : 28] And that brings us to our third and final reaction for today. Determination for the man God has appointed is coming.

Notice how Paul finishes off his speech. After laying out God's big story, where he tells us all about God, he tells his hearers, this calls for one response.

Repent. Verse 30. Repentance is about setting course for a new destination.

It's about turning so that your direction is not towards idols, but towards the one true living God. And this is where world missions must lead to.

World missions is not simply about digging wells or helping people build new homes important as those are. World missions involves preaching a message that calls on people to look at themselves personally, examine their cultural heritages honestly, and repent where necessary.

[35 : 44] Why is that? Because God has appointed one person. He is the one to whom we must give account to, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Verse 31. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. Earlier, the Athenians thought that they could stand in judgment over Paul's message. But God says, one day it is Jesus who will stand in judgment over you. For God has given one definitive proof.

Verse 31 again. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead. When we think of the resurrection, we often think about how it points to the new life we can have in Christ.

And that is wonderfully true. But we mustn't forget, it also points to judgment. When Jesus rose again, the clock started ticking.

[36 : 53] What the Bible calls the last days are here, the time between his first coming and his second coming. For when Jesus comes again, that is the time when the world is going to be completely renewed.

But that means sin will be wiped out once and for all. And so unrepentant sinners cannot be part of God's final renewed kingdom.

And that's why the call to repent must go out to the world. But here is the beauty of the gospel.

Repentance means saying no to idols, but it also means saying yes to Jesus.

In other words, you're saying yes to the person who is the most merciful, the most kind, the most powerful, and the most just person in this universe. You're saying yes to something good or better, someone good.

And that's the good news Paul ultimately is bringing the Athenians. That's the good news that was brought to us. And the good news we bring to the world. You can say yes to someone good.

[38 : 14] The tragedy in verses 32 to 34, of course, is that not everyone will take Paul up on his offer. Some would prefer to live in ignorance because they think it's better for them.

Better to pretend that I don't really have cancer than to go for that checkup to confirm the massive lump that I have. believe. But there will be others who will believe.

They just need to hear. And the time is now. Jesus is coming, but he is not yet here. And so that should give us a renewed determination to make the God who is still unknown to so many known people. It won't always be easy. Rico Tice, the founder of Christianity Explored, talks about the pain line we all face.

He says we're often reluctant to share the good news for one simple reason. Sometimes it's painful. Of course it is. But he says the real question is what would make us be ready to cross the pain line.

[39 : 27] If we think it's worth it. If we think God's glory is worth it, we'll do it. And until we cross the pain line, we don't know what response we will get.

And he says, yes, sometimes people will be hostile, but sometimes people will be hungry, and you will never know until you cross the pain line.

You have to risk the hostility, to discover the hunger. So, when the world does not know God, ask God to let the distress well up from within you.

Then ask him to fan the flames of your desire to make him known. And carry on with determination because you know that the man God has appointed is coming as judge.

And who knows, if you ask God for that, he might say to you, I want you to do that not just in Kuching, but in another place.

[40 : 37] I'm preparing you for Bangkok, or Tokyo, or Kampala, or Lima, or modern day Rome. All so that someone, somewhere, would seek God and actually find him.

Wouldn't it be a great privilege to be used by God in this way? Let us pray. Heavenly Father, on this Mission Sunday, we thank you first of all that you are indeed a God who has not hidden yourself, but you have revealed yourself and make yourself known to us chiefly in the Lord Jesus.

Thank you that we can have a personal relationship with him. But Father, we confess that often we like to keep Jesus for ourselves. We are selfish and we don't want to make him known to others. And we are often too apathetic when we look at our city and the world around us and we shrug our shoulders when we see that they do not know you.

Will you help us to change our heart slowly so that it would be a heart that is a flame for your honor and for your glory? And will you help us and equip us so that we can make you known, that we don't just want to make you known, but we have the tools to make you known.

[42 : 12] Help us to learn how to connect with people, to persuade them, to do it with gentleness all so that they would know Jesus.

And help us to be determined even when it's tough because we know that the Lord Jesus is going to come one day as judge. There will be a final cut off point. So please Lord, would you help us to be willing to cross the pain line to share your good news.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.