The Unknown God

May 17th, 2020

6th Sunday after Easter

I would love to travel to Athens someday. I would love to see the Parthenon, the Hephaestion, the broken caryatids, the ancient seat of learning, the birthplace of democracy. And I would love to walk through the acropolis where the apostle Paul walked, where he preached what many have thought of as his most unsuccessful sermon, which we read in Acts 17 today (Cf. William Ramsay, *Cities of St. Paul.* Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2001, 194). This is some comfort for me; if Stephen can be stoned for a sermon and the apostle Paul can fail at a sermon, then perhaps I should not stress much about what I present today.

Why did the court of the Areopagus laugh at Paul? One might suppose it was his offensive remarks on Greek religion and culture—but the Greek philosophers such as Xenophanes, Heraclitus, Aratus, Epimenides and Cleanthes had already made such remarks. Why did they mock Paul? Perhaps because Paul presented three timeless but scandalous thoughts. First, that God is unknown to us unless God is revealed to us: “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (Acts 17:23). Second, that God is not the product of culture, but the origin of all human beings and the driver of their history: “From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’” (Acts 17:26-28). Third, that God calls us to repent of our ignorance because God will judge our lives through *one particular risen Lord in righteousness*. Three landmines that could detonate our whole worldview if not a greater part of Christendom even today. A great many aspects of our cultural and theological positions explode upon contact: racism, exceptionalism, globalism, determinism, moralistic therapeutic deism, relativism, immoralism, radical skepticism, materialism, maybe even aspects of our environmentalism. In the concise version of the sermon we have received, Paul speaks some of the most radical words I have ever read. I could spend a lifetime trying to grasp them.

In our hearts, there is an altar and a hunger for this unknown God. Our encounter with God always begins with this—the One who is unknown to us: “For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, “To an unknown god.” What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you (Acts 17:23). The philosopher and theologian of late antiquity Boethius summarizes it beautifully in his book *The Consolation of Philosophy*: “A knowing God acts and ignorant men look on with wonder at his actions” (Tr. Victor Watts, London: Penguin, 1999. 123107); “And it is not allowed to man to comprehend in thought all the ways of the divine work or expound them in speech” (109). At the heart of it is this deep apophatic truth—that there is a God that none of us could create, imagine or know unless this God had revealed Himself to us, and that this God will reveal Himself and a righteousness we could not know without Him, without His revelation. In our day, we typically reverse things. Our minds doubt and abandon the revelation, and we try to fill the unknown through speculation or contemplation. It has become easy to confuse apostasy with the apophatic. To contemplate God, it is precisely the opposite that is required—to resp0nd to what God has revealed and to stand in awe of the unknowns beyond, growing in hunger for God. Paul suggests that it is only through God that we can comprehend the meaning of reality and history, that history itself is the story of humanity groping its way through the darkness in search of the very God we have abandoned. The Book of Ecclesiastes famously states: “He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). God has given us a hunger that only God can fill. Nothing less than this unknown God will satisfy our appetite for love and truth.

God is also greater than anything we can imagine. There is a simple, minimal beauty in the ontological argument for the existence of God that Anselm of Canterbury provides, forcing us to think deeply about our relationship to God: “Therefore there can be no doubt at all that something than which a greater cannot be thought exists both in the understanding and in reality” (*Proslogion* in *The Prayers and Meditations of Saint Anselm with the Proslogion*. Tr. Benedicta Ward, SLG, London: Penguin, 1973. 245). One might dismiss this as arcane and irrelevant medieval logic, but in the 20th Century, the mathematician Kurt Gödel presented a version of this argument in modal logic, and it has been defended in more recent times by philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga and William Lane Craig (

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xBmAKCvWl74> ). What is beautiful or important about Anselm’s ontological argument? I believe it is the minimal simplicity of directing us to imagine how great and transcendent God really is. Wherever I erect a doubt, there is a God who transcends that doubt. Wherever I encounter an impossibility, there is a God greater than that impossibility. When I live as though there is no God who is maximally good, maximally powerful, maximally present, the God in whom I live, move and have my being, how can I say that I know Him? Most antagonism to God begins when we are content with something, anything that is not maximally great and transcendent, when we pursue anything short of God Himself. All of our sins, heresies, errors, and doubts, our fears and our failures begin at this point. And this should not come as a radical surprise to us; for if God is indeed love (1 John 4:8), then failing to know God means that I will fail in love and in my spiritual pilgrimage. Thomas Merton reflects on this maximal transcendence of God, writing: “It is a greater thing and a better prayer to live in Him Who is Infinite, and to rejoice that He is Infinite, than to strive always to press His infinity into the narrow space of our own hearts. As long as I am content to know that He is infinitely greater than I, and that I cannot know Him unless He shows Himself to me, I will have Peace, and He will be near me and in me, and I will rest in Him” (Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999. 97).

The apostle says that God cannot be manufactured: “The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things” (Acts 17:25-25): “we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals” (Acts 17:29). One of our greatest temptations in the spiritual life is to pursue the god that we have shaped in our imaginations— personally, liturgically, or theologically. God is not the product of our contemplative life, our religiosity, our justice, or our worship. Our hearts and minds can become the chief obstacle, the veils of darkness, the greatest distractions that keep us from God. And then we wonder when our false gods disappoint. God is not initially in me, after all, but I am in God. This suggests something about the nature of how to search. Once more, as Thomas Merton observes: “Suppose that my ‘poverty’ be a secret hunger for spiritual riches: suppose that by pretending to empty myself, pretending to be silent, I am really trying to cajole God into enriching me with some experience—what then? Then everything becomes a distraction. All created things interfere with my quest for some special experience. I must shut them out, or they will tear me apart. What is worse—I myself am a distraction. But, unhappiest thing of all—if my prayer is centered in myself, if it seeks only an enrichment of my own self, my prayer itself will be my greatest potential distraction. Full of my own curiosity, I have eaten of the tree of Knowledge and torn myself away from myself and from God. I am left rich and alone and nothing can assuage my hunger: everything I touch turns into a distraction. Let me seek, then, the gift of silence, and poverty, and solitude, where everything I touch is turned into prayer: where the sky is my prayer, the birds are my prayer, the wind in the trees is my prayer, for God is all in all. For this to be so I must be really poor. I must seek nothing: but I must be most content with whatever I have from God. True poverty is that of the beggar who is glad to receive alms from anyone, but especially from God. False poverty is that of a man who pretends to have the self-sufficiency of an angel. True poverty, then, is a receiving and giving of thanks, only keeping what we need to consume. False poverty pretends not to need, pretends not to ask, strives to seek everything and refuses gratitude for anything at all” (Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1958. 92-93). In other words, our contemplation, religiosity, virtue and worship should come as a loving and humble response to the loving call of this ever unknown, ever knowable God drawing us into Him.

The apostle may be giving an exercise in apologetics, but not without also inviting us into an anagogical journey, a rising up into the great depths of divine life. Is God unknown to us today? Is God unknown to us today despite our professions of faith because we were discontented with revelation and content with what we thought we knew and content to proclaim an incomplete or inferior gospel? Consciousness and intellect alone will never lead us to God. They are flashlights with limited battery life (cf. the flashlight analogy of Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, 1990). I would say that they might not even be flashlights at all because they are contingent on another light. And thus our history would be blindly searching the darkness (Luke 11:35). To search an infinite darkness, you need an infinite light. Our hearts crave this light. The Psalmist says: “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path” (Psalm 119:105). The light of the word brings us to the one who maximally fulfilled the word, the Word that became flesh, that is, the Lord Jesus Christ, the light of the world (John 8:12). As Paul says: “While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” (Acts 17:29-31). Jesus is the assurance that the world will indeed be judged in righteousness. Despite our tragic history of sword, plague, famine and groping around in the darkness, God has offered us a true hope by coming to meet us in Christ. The resurrection is offered as evidence that God’s justice and mercy will triumph over all that is broken, dark and evil—and we too can rise from the ashes of history into the life of eternity. If the journey were not real, there would be no need to repent, no need to turn, no need to change course. And yet, by inviting us to change our direction, God assures us that the journey is real and ours to love if we will embark.