

## **An Unknown God?**

May 12, 2021 Scott Gunn

*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. 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 17:23-25

Paul is a brilliant teacher and preacher. Here, as he speaks at the Areopagus, he connects the Athenians' own religious practices with his homiletical aim, which is to introduce the polytheistic Greeks to the one living and true God. The Athenians have built an altar to an unknown God, perhaps to cover their bases, in case with their other shrines they have missed a god. But Paul points out the folly of their practice.

On the one hand, Paul acknowledges that God is beyond our imagining. So, yes, God is unknowable. But we also know that Paul is fully aware that we Christians can know God.

*Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.* — Hebrews 1:1-3

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob might be beyond our grasp, but we can see God in Jesus Christ, who is the exact imprint of God's very being. In Christ's humility, generosity, mercy, and love, we can see the eternal God. So God is never unknowable to us.

Paul's teaching about the worship of unknown Gods is helpful for us, not just for ancient Athenians. I don't see altars to unknown Gods where I live, but I see plenty of people who act as if we can't know God. The God we worship and praise is surely beyond our knowledge. But our Father is knowable through the person of Jesus Christ and the animating work of the Spirit. We can meet Jesus Christ in the scriptures. We can meet Jesus Christ in the sacraments. We can meet Jesus Christ in the church. And in those places, when we are meeting Jesus, we are meeting the exact imprint of God's very being.

We don't need altars to unknown gods. We have altars to the God we know. When we make God inaccessible as an impenetrable mystery, we do this at the risk of our souls and the peril of the world. Let us, instead, learn to know and love the Word made flesh. And let us share this living Lord, whom we know, with a world in need of hope, love, mercy, and grace.