

God Unknown

The day it all happened I was strolling through our great city of Athens. The sun was gleaming on the magnificent buildings and statues. My eye was drawn, as ever, to the hill of the Acropolis crowned by the Parthenon and other great temples. I climbed up the new marble staircase built on the orders of the Emperor Claudius and surveyed the scene. A short distance away stood the massive bronze statue of the goddess Athena, the patron goddess of Athens. It had been sculpted by Phidias in the golden age of Athens, almost 500 years ago. All around stood the evidence of the glories of that age of Pericles, who masterminded those building projects. But it was the perfectly proportioned, pillared beauty of the Parthenon that stood out above them all.

But as I looked around I was troubled – and not just because these spoke of the glories of a past age. Of course the golden age of Athens is past, the age of Pericles, of the great philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, and of the great playwrights, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. Athens is now a political backwater. Rome is now the power of the world, and our neighbouring city of Corinth is now the great city of Greece. But that's not what bothered me. What was bothering me that morning was what always bothered me. How to make sense of it all?

Let me explain. Take the goddess Athena, for instance—the goddess of the divine mind, of wisdom and courage. Although the magnificent statues of her on the Acropolis dated from the great Age of Reason and Philosophy, yet the myths that surrounded her belonged to a still more ancient past, and all kinds of religious and superstitious practices surround her to this day. Her most magnificent statue, of gold and ivory and 40 feet tall, which stands inside the Parthenon, is not just an object of artistic admiration, it is an object of worship. And my own name, Dionysius, is of course the name of one of the gods – the patron deity of agriculture and the theatre, the god of wine, ecstasy and madness!

But therein lay the problem. Was life really governed by all these various gods and goddesses? Gods and goddesses who, according to the myths, fought with each other, lied to each other and cheated each other. These gods were near to us and like us, but they were limited and chaotic. Were they, as some of our philosophers said, just projections of the human world and the natural world? Behind them lurked Fate, impersonal and intangible. How to make sense of it?

Athens was full of images and statues of the various gods and goddesses and altars to them. Indeed such was the religious superstition that there were actually altars to unnamed, anonymous and unknown

gods. On one famous occasion, Epimenides from Crete put an end to a plague in Athens by instructing that a flock of sheep be let loose and then altars to unknown gods be set up wherever the sheep rested! As I looked down from the Acropolis, I could see the sites of some of these—the altars, that is, not the sheep! But if deity is as uncertain and unknowable as this suggests, how can we be sure of anything?

Long ago I had discounted the popular superstitions about such things, due to the influence of the great philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, who flourished in the golden age of Greek culture. They were concerned with discovering the unity that lay beneath the surface complexity of the world. But they had a problem. Was this Unity personal and good, and therefore limited (because evil also exists)? This was Plato's position. Or was this Unity impersonal, unlimited and therefore amoral, as Aristotle believed?

Long before our time the impersonal had won. Our dominant philosophical schools are the Stoics and Epicureans and they, in different ways, hold that man is caught in the impersonal process of the world. The Stoics believe that the unifying factor in the universe is an impersonal but rational Fate, which they call Logos or Reason, and which they usually identify with deity. The Stoics, therefore, believe there is nothing of the divine outside of the processes of nature. In

consequence they hold that man should live consistently with Reason, being self-sufficient and unbending.

The Epicureans, by contrast, believe that whatever role the gods may have had in creating the world, they no longer have any interest in it. The force that now sustains the universe is the totally impersonal, random movement and combination of atomic particles. Man is formed of these particles and when they dissolve at death, he ceases to exist. Therefore, in such a world governed by chance, a man should just seek his own happiness.

Although the philosophers would dispute this, in my view neither the Stoics nor the Epicureans differ significantly from popular religion in their emphasis on man being part of the impersonal processes of nature. Fate or chance rules everything. Does it then matter how we live? The various philosophers would generally say that it *does* matter how we live, but they all disagree with one another about how we should live and why it matters. We seem to lack the unity that we desire. Where lies the truth? These were the thoughts that were running through my mind that day as I walked around the Acropolis.

I looked down on the city to the south. There were the two great theatres – the Odeon and the Theatre of Dionysius (no relation!) They reminded me of our great

dramatists and poets. I turned to the west to the Hill of Ares (the god of war) where the Council of the Areopagus (of which I am a member) was founded. I remembered the words of the god Apollo in the play called "The Eumenides" by our great dramatist Aeschylus ("The Eumenides" is a grim joke, as it means "The Kindly Ones" and is given as a name for "The Furies" – the agents of judgement.) But on the occasion of the founding of the Council of the Areopagus, Apollo supposedly said, "When a man dies and the earth drinks up his blood, there is no resurrection." What did lie beyond death? Was death itself the end, as some philosophers held? Or were the old myths really true – that there is grey world of the dead in Hades from which there is the possibility of being condemned to the hell of Tartarus, or being rewarded with entry to the Elysian Fields? Who could know? No one had ever come back to tell us.

I went back down from the Acropolis and, as I went, I looked down on the city to the north, to the Agora, the Marketplace, where many of our important buildings stand and where the Council of the Areopagus meets in the Royal Porch, when required. The Areopagus is an ancient court and originally the senate of Athens, but gradually, like the city itself, its powers have been eroded, until now it mainly deals with moral and religious matters. It still has great

honour, but little power. The Agora, though originally a marketplace, was now more a marketplace of ideas, where people met to discuss and debate the issues of the day and especially any new ideas.

Just as I approached the Agora, I saw my friend Damaris, who is a wealthy woman of some standing in the city, hurrying towards me. "Dionysius! Dionysius!" she was shouting, "Where have you been? I've just been in the Agora, and there is this most interesting speaker there. He is drawing quite a crowd. Come on!" she said, taking my arm and virtually dragging me back in the direction she'd come. She hardly stopped to draw breath she was so excited. She said, "I saw him there yesterday too. But today there seems to be much more excitement. Some of the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers are there arguing with him. He is a Jew and seemingly has caused quite a stir in their synagogue as well, but now he is out in the marketplace, unlike any other Jewish teachers I have heard of, and he is mixing with everyone and arguing with them. He seems to know all about our philosophy and religion and even our poets as well as his own Scriptures! Some of the philosophers are insulting him and calling him a birdbrain! But I think that's because he seems too clever for them and they don't know how to answer him. Others are saying he is advocating foreign gods. He keeps on talking about Iesous and

Anastasis. They say he's talking about a new god, the Healer, and his consort, the Restorer, but I'm not sure if that's what he means at all."

By this time we had arrived at the Agora and I could see the crowd. There was some laughter and occasionally some cheering, but mostly there was a kind of puzzled silence apart from this one voice. It was a strange voice. It spoke Greek well, and in spite of the eastern accent, I could make out what he was saying. He didn't use a lot of the flowery language the philosophers and poets and politicians tended to use. He spoke in more down to earth terms. And he seemed to speak with a certainty and an authority.

I finally managed to catch a glimpse of him. He was a small man, with a hooked nose, not very prepossessing in appearance. He was obviously a Jew, but not like any Jew I had ever come across. Normally they keep themselves to themselves. They have all sorts of laws and rules and traditions that mean it is very difficult for them to mix with people of other religions and races. But here he was rubbing shoulders with all and sundry. I didn't know a great deal about the Jews. I knew they have Scriptures which they revered. They have no idols or images and worship only one God, and they have weird and wonderful tales from their history.

But just as we reached the crowd and were trying to get a better view of the man, it was decided by some

of the philosophers present who were members of the Areopagus, that he should be brought before the Council to hear what he had to say in more tranquil surroundings and to see if what he was teaching held any dangers for the citizens.

We all duly tramped off to the Royal Porch where, once everyone had settled, the chairman addressed the man who, by now we had discovered, was a Roman citizen from Tarsus and was called Paulos. The Chairman invited him to address the Council, saying, "May we know what is this new teaching you are proclaiming? We are hearing strange things from you, and we want to know their meaning."

Paulos then stood up and addressed the Council and the interested audience. Now, his address was very short, and indeed it was cut short in the end, and I am not sure I remember all of what he said, because my mind was racing as he talked, trying to concentrate and work out what he was saying. So I will tell you what I remember him saying and also what I thought about it as I go along.

He addressed us as "Men of Athens" and immediately engaged our attentions by saying that he saw we were very religious. The word he used had a certain ambiguity and could mean superstitious, so we listened all the more carefully to see what he meant. Was he complimenting us or insulting us?

He said he had been walking around our city looking at all our temples and altars, much the same as I had been doing earlier. He obviously took a great interest in us. Then he said something that really made me sit up. He said, "I even saw an altar with the inscription 'To God Unknown'. Therefore, the One you are worshipping in ignorance, I am proclaiming to you." This tied in with my thought of only an hour before. Was there really something missing in our knowledge?

He continued, "This is the God who created the cosmos and everything in it. He is the Ruler of heaven and earth." I found I was grasping what he was saying. The cosmos was not created and ruled by various powers and gods, but by one God. Was this the unity that we Greeks were searching for? What he was saying was different from what the Stoics taught. They spoke of God as the soul of the cosmos, but he spoke of God as pre-existing the cosmos and not dependent on it.

"So he doesn't need manmade temples to live in," he was saying. "In fact he doesn't depend on us at all. It's the other way round. He gives us life and breath and everything else." This took some time to get my head round. Paulos was demolishing all our fine temples as surely as if he had broken them down with battering rams! Some of our philosophers had snipped

at the branches of our religious superstitions, Paulos cut the root!

But he was ploughing on. It was difficult to keep up with him. His next statement really caused a sharp intake of breath on the part of many present. He said, "God made from one man every nation to inhabit the whole earth. He planned their history and defined their geography." This was hard for Athenians to accept, because our legends told us that we had sprung from the original soil of Greece and were superior to other men. But I knew in my heart what Paulos said was true. Of course we weren't superior to other nations, we had often been defeated, and now the Romans ruled the world! And all races must be related as all could intermarry, and could understand each other (if their languages were translated).

But now Paulos was saying that God had a great purpose for the human race in all this, and that was that people would seek him and find him. Again it was if a light went off in my head. So this was the purpose of life! There was one purpose for everyone and it was to seek this one God that Paulos said was unknown to us, but whom he was now making known!

"But he is not far from each one of us", he added, and then he astounded many of us by quoting some of our own poets to back up what he had just said. He quoted Epimenides from Crete (the very one who had

had the altars to unknown gods built!) who said of the Supreme Being, "In him we live and move and exist." Then he added a quotation from Aratus, who came from the same province as Paulus: "For we are God's children".

"Since we are God's children," he said, "We should not think that God is like gold or silver or material images and idols that are less than human beings, for human beings make them." At last I understood what the philosophers were only groping after. We shouldn't bow down and worship things less than ourselves. Instead we ought to worship the one who had created us as his children with similarities to himself!"

Now Paulos was coming to the heart of what he wanted to say. He said, "In the past God disregarded such ignorant ideas, but now he is commanding the whole human race everywhere to change their ideas, because he has fixed a day when he will judge the whole world." We were familiar with the ideas of judgement and nemesis, but this urgent emphasis on immanent judgement of everyone and the need for a change of heart sounded new in our ears, but again I felt a strange thrill that it was comprehensive and reasonable and fair, although a great terror came over me as well, lest that day of judgement came and found me unprepared. Could it really be true?

It was as if Paulos had read my thoughts. He said, "God will judge the world with justice by a particular man he has appointed, and he has given proof of this to everyone by raising that man from the dead!" For a moment there was a deathly silence; then there was an explosion of noise. The word Paulos had used for rising from the dead was the same word that the god Apollo had used when he said "There is no *anastasis*, no resurrection". So this is what Paulos meant by Iesous and Anastasis – this man he talked of was Iesous and he claimed God had raised him from the dead.

Some were laughing and openly mocking. "There is no *anastasis*!" they shouted. Somehow the whole notion of the dead body returning from the grave was repugnant to us Greeks. When he could make himself heard, the Chairman said that they would postpone the hearing to another time, and everyone started to leave.

But there was something about what Paulos had been saying that gripped me, and I knew he had not finished what he had wanted to say, so I followed him out, and I found Damaris and some others also wanted to hear more. We discovered Paulos was delighted to talk with us and was not at all put out by the reaction he had received. He seemed to be used to such reactions even among his own people.

Our greatest fear is the fear of death, and none of our greatest literature or philosophy or religion had

anything to say that had taken away that fear. But Paulos spoke of one who had conquered death and I wanted to know more.

I discovered from Paulos that not only had this Iesous conquered death. He was the Son of God who had become man and died by crucifixion under the Romans, but in this way he had suffered the penalty of our blameworthy ignorance, so that we might be forgiven.

All the broken pieces fell into place and that day I became a follower, not only of Paulos, but of Iesous, the Son of God.

There are some that say that Christians are ignorant and credulous people, but I found that the good news that Paulos proclaimed gave me the answers I had been seeking all my life and which no philosophy had ever given me.

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