

Theme: 'To the unknown God' 10 May 2026

'Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.' (Acts 17:23)

When I was 6 years old, I had, what I thought then, was an 'out of this world experience'. Picture it, it is summer 1965. Back then, all the children's comics, at least the boy's ones, were full of comic strips about either cowboys, spies or astronauts and creatures from outer-space.

I was standing by the side of the long straight road that links the Lizard peninsular with the Culdrose Naval station. And then I saw it. It began as a dot in the distance, but as it got closer, I saw it more nearly, more clearly I was thinking this is a spacecraft that has landed on earth coming toward me. It was green and I couldn't take my eyes off this machine as came closer and closer. I had never seen anything like it and my eyes were out on stalks as it not only came closer but passed me on the road, after which I watched it disappear into the distance going the other way.

'What was that? I asked myself. How stylish and sleek were the lines of this machine and how fast as it passed me, it even seemed to glide rather than drive along. Had the aliens really come to earth? Well, no. I later learned that what I had seen was indeed a rare bird in Cornwall at that time, but it was a Citroen DS. It might have been an alien driving it though!

I only mention this because in an idle moment of surfing Facebook marketplace the other day, looking for something else I saw one, a DS, a green one, just like I had seen 60 years ago. Control Technique OK and for €6000. It took me right back, and for a moment, I have to admit, I coveted it ever so slightly. Alas, reality again came crashing in when I thought that was no good when there is a bathroom and kitchen to install at home!

Paul is walking through the Areopagus in Athens, a council chamber where philosophers and students can mix and discuss philosophical ideas and especially new philosophical ideas. There was nothing better they liked to do.

Paul, having preached the gospel in synagogues over the two or three days previous, to eager listeners, is persuaded to address the council. Paul's ideas were new - no-one had heard of someone rising from the dead before! It must have sounded to them like something from outer-space. How would they take to the idea?

Paul, himself knows that in this philosophical company, he is out of his comfort zone in terms of preaching. In the synagogues he could begin with and point to the Hebrew scriptures and lead his hearers to Jesus in that way. The Greeks though, had never heard of the OT. So how was he to find a commonality with the philosophers with which to start? He sees the altar with the inscription 'To the unknown god' and seizes his opportunity to proclaim the Gospel.

The altar itself was a fail-safe for the Greeks. If any of the usual gods were not working out for someone, then a prayer to the 'unknown god' covered all the bases. It was all very impersonal though; no-one actually got to know their god; there was no living relationship involved in the theatre or in that which was Greek belief at the time.

The Greeks and the Romans worshipped different deities who tended to have their own 'speciality' with which they could be called upon, such as love; virility; strength; wisdom; good weather; riches; military victory; whatever it was that people wanted to call upon. We can laugh, we don't indulge in such vain belief do we? Well, do we?

In addition, the Greeks thought the gods cared little for what humans got up to. Which is where Paul comes in, to introduce a God who could be known through an invitation to search for him.

This was indeed different news when what a person worshipped was an idol, even if they did think it was real. We know that an idol is anything that gets in the way of our relationship with the one true God, and we could have plenty of those. Is it money or status? Cars or fashion? Lust or desire? For most of us there is something that can get in the way, something that distracts us from spending good quality time with God as we should. Or if we attend worship regularly, do we really feel that we know God as closely as we should? How can we get to know him better?

The scriptures tell us a lot about God through Jesus. The Law (the first five books of the OT) tells us a lot about his likes and dislikes. The rest of the OT tells us about the lives of God's great and not so great ones, their faults and their faithfulness. Our liturgy in worship does or at least should do the same. The Lord's Prayer alone is a mighty prayer that invites a great deal of study and reflection line by line in order to tell us about him and more importantly, about his relationship with us while allowing us to get to know him personally.

I eventually got to know what sort of vehicle it was that passed me on the Lizard Road. I identified one in a 'scripture' called 'The Observer's Book of Cars' and I found out more about it; eventually I saw another 'in the flesh', so to speak.

What Paul did for the Greeks was to make the unknown God knowable to those who wanted to find out more and get to know him. Paul's plan worked. Although some of the gathering rejected his preaching, others wanted to hear more and so the gospel was spread among the Greeks also.

As they got to know their God better through Jesus Christ, they came to understand that they too might come to see him 'in the flesh' when the great day of glory comes. We, through our devotion and worship, can do the same.