

SERMON FOR THE SUNDAY JUBILATE

(Cape Town - 13 April 2008)

Text: ²² Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you...." (Full text: Acts 17:22-34)

Whenever you arrive in a mayor city, there is always something that characterises that city. In Cape Town it is undoubtedly Table Mountain which you can see from kilometers away and indeed from all side. In Pretoria it may be the Union Building or the Voortrekker Monument, and in Johannesburg the mine dumps that have provided Johannesburg with the name eGoli, the place of gold.

When near the end of the first century the apostle Paul arrived for the first time in the great Greek city of Athens, there was one thing that struck him in particular. It wasn't that large rock called Areopagus, but rather the multitude of temples and altars that decorated the landscape.

Athens was clearly a "religious" city. The altars were dedicated to a wide range of Greek gods. There was for example a statue and an altar dedicated to the goddess "Athena" from which Athens got its name. She was the goddess of wisdom, responsible for justice amongst the Greeks. Athena had a half-brother, called "Ares", after whom the "Areopagus" was named. Ares in turn was the Olympian god of war and battle.

For every conceivable aspect of life, the Greeks had a god or deity. These gods were guarded jealously. No foreigner, like Paul, could just walk into the city of Athens and introduce another god. If he did, his life would be threatened. But fearing the wrath of a god that they themselves may have overlooked, the Greeks of Athens build an altar which they dedicated "To An Unknown God".

Being a city of philosophers, the wisdom-seeking Athenians once invited the apostle Paul to explain his teaching to them on the Areopagus. As he did so, not being able to introduce a new deity, he latched on to this altar dedicated to the "Unknown God". He opened his sermon with the statement: ***"Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious... (but amongst all your altars) I have found one with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you (today)."***

Paul's sermon is in many ways a watershed sermon that distinguishes better than ever before between Religion or being religious and the Christian faith.

On the hand Paul acknowledges the religiosity of the Athenians positively. He says, what I see here with all these altars, is in some way the *natural* result of what God himself has laid in our human hearts. He says, God is far greater than we can ever imagine. The whole world is created

him. He made the heavens and the earth. Life and breath of every single living creature on this earth, comes from him. And, he is not only the God of “one” nation, but the God of “all” people.

Paul continues and says: When God made man he gave him the most wonderful habitat, characterised by set times and fixed seasons. And everything you see in heaven and on earth glorifies this God. And when God created it, he did so with a purpose. He did so, so that man may “seek him”, and “would reach out to him.” The heavens and the earth declare the glory of God and awakens in u the realisation of the very existence of God.

But then facing the Athenians, Paul says, there is a problem with all of these altars. First, God does not live in temples. Temples are too small. And secondly God can not be made by our human hands as objects that we worship.

As modern day people we know this, of course. It doesn't enter our mind to worship God as some of kind of an object that we ourselves made. But we mustn't talk to fast. We find our own ways in “objectivying” God. We don't make statues of god, representing the deity of rain, fertility and war, but we nevertheless “create” a multitude of perceptions of God - in our minds. This way we create a god, who is there to give me happiness (the happiness god) , or to give we wealth (the god of wealth). Or we create a god who there to help me in my business, or to heal my marriage.

And inevitably, without realising it, also in *our* god-worship we become like the ancient Greeks. In different ways we try to gain the favour of the gods of wealth and happiness and marriage to get what we want. *We become religious.* We may not build an altar and bring a sacrifice. But we invent our own means of “appeasing” God. In this way, we may think if I go to church every Sunday, or at least every second Sunday, that will surely give me a good standing with God. Or we try to be as honest as possible in our business and believe that because of our honesty, God will surely reward us and make our business boom.

Paul says, you got it all wrong. God is not some kind of an (man made) “object” you must continually try to appease to get what you want. He says: ***“In him we live and move and have our being.”*** Everything we are and everything we have comes from him.

That needs to sink in. God does not need me or my good deeds to do something. ***“He is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything”***, Paul says. In fact the very thought that I am doing something *for* God is blasphemous. He doesn't need me. I am the one that needs him.

And when God provides the blessing of life, the motivation for his goodness is not what I did for him beforehand. He is his own motivation. He blesses me, because *he* wants to help me. He sends his rain, because *he* is so gracious to me. He sends his Son into this world, not because I asked him, or because I repented, but because *he* wants to forgive me.

In the light of success or prosperity this understanding of God leads to total humbleness. If you make a success of life, it humbles you, because you realise: “God has been good to me.” Realisation of God's grace makes you humble.

Religion says: Because I was so good, or worked so hard, that is why God has blessed me. For Paul this is rubbish!

We don't *make* God gracious through our good deeds . He is gracious. We don't cause him to bless us. He *wants* to bless us. I therefore also go to church or read my Bible, or pray to God, not because I want to entice God to bless me. But I do so because I want to *receive* his unmerited grace. And this is where I receive it. And every time it happens, I am humbled. In my heart I know: "***I fall (far) short of the glory of God***", but this great God has been good to me.

That is the "unknown God", that Paul preaches. He is the opposite of the gods of Religion. There is not need to twist his arm. He is not in need of human service. He is the *creator* of all things. We are his offspring. In him we live and move and have our being.

So far the religious Athenians listened attentively. They may even have nodded in approval as Paul spoke. It was interesting talk. But faith in God is not just interesting, it is committal. And that, by the way, is the main difference between being religious and being a Christian. Religiosity never demands a total commitment. I choose, when I would like to be bit a religious. Maybe it is "time" to worship God again or to go to Communion.

Christian faith is the result of a "conversion", a radical "turn around" in which I acknowledge my total dependance on God.

And those are the very words of Paul to the Athenians. He says, there was a time of ignorance when you did not know better. And God in his grace overlooked your ignorance. . But now God commands all people everywhere to "convert." Convert means here: I realise I need God and I stop dealing with God: I do this or you, you do that for me.. In Jesus Christ God has done everything. And only through him we receive everything. And one day we will all stand before his judgement seat. And the only thing that will count then, is our relationship to Jesus Christ. Nothing else.

There are no half measures here. Jesus says: "***No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back, is fit for the service in the kingdom of God***" (Lk.9:62) . A bit of religion does not work. It is all or nothing. And because the Gospel is so absolute, it divides. We see it here as well. When Paul started preaching about Jesus, the one who died for our sins and was raised again, the audience was divided into two groups. There were no more neutral spectators. Some scoffed and sneered. Other started believing.

But for those who started believing, the Gospel became a source of rejoicing. And that - to remind you again - is the name of this Sunday. Jubilate! Rejoice! Why? Because we have discovered the God who in and through Jesus Christ has done everything for us. Amen.

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