

## COLLECT SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

O God who has prepared for those who love you such good things as pass one's understanding: Pour into our hearts such love toward you, that we loving you in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever.  
*Amen.*

### *A Reading from the Acts of the Apostles 17: 22 - 31*

Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 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. 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.' Since we are God's offspring, 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. 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."

*The Word of the Lord*

*Psalm 66:7-18 (Book of Common Prayer: page 674)*

*A Reading from the First Letter of Peter 3:13-22*

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous and the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is eight persons, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you- not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

*The Word of the Lord.*

*The Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ  
According to John 14:15 - 21*

Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.

*The Gospel of the Lord.*

*TO AN UNKNOWN GOD...THIS I PROCLAIM TO YOU*

The Gospel has reached a wide diversity of people. Its power has touched rich and poor, Jew and gentile, slave and free, male and female. But can the Gospel hold its own in the sophisticated intellectual environment of a university town? Luke, the author of the book of *Acts* takes St. Paul to Athens, to the heart of the very best pagan culture. Athens is the town of such world renown philosophers as Plato and Pericles.

Frankly, Paul is unimpressed. The sculptures of Phidias move him not. Good Jew that he is, Paul is distressed to see the city of Athens as little more than a wasteland “full of idols.”<sup>1</sup> He argues with Jews, Epicureans, and Stoics, and these stalwart philosophers look down their academic noses at this “babbling,”<sup>2</sup> as they call Paul when he is preaching to them.

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<sup>1</sup> The Holy Bible: New International Version; Zondervan Publishing House, Nashville TN, 1984  
*Acts 17:16, page 785*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* Acts 17:18 page 785

There were in fact many altars to unknown gods in Athens. Six hundred years before Paul arrived there was a terrible pandemic that decimated Athens. It was much like our coronovirus. Like us today, they did not know the reason, the cause, nor did they have medical weapons to defeat the virus. Vaccines were unknown in those days. Nothing could halt the pestilence then, as so far we are not able to control the Covoind-19 now. Before the advent of science, the Athenians could rely only on superstition and pagan prayer. In modern times, we too can only pray until science comes along and gives us an antidote. But our prayer is based on the Revelation of Jesus Christ. Because of the knowledge God has given us through modern medicine, research people are working to find a treatment and a vaccine. We know with relative certainty, in time the coronovirus will be stopped. However, prior to the advent of science the Athenians had no way of knowing that their virus would be stopped.

In Athens, a Cretan poet, Epimenides had come forward with a plan. A flock of black and white sheep were let loose throughout the city from the Areopagus, the Greek temple. Wherever a sheep lay down, it was sacrificed to the nearest god that was represented by a particular altar. If a sheep lay down near a shrine of no known god, it was sacrificed to the altar of the Unknown God.<sup>3</sup>

William Barclay, Scottish Biblical scholar shows us there are a series of steps in Paul's sermon;

1)God is not made, but the Maker, therefore God who made all things cannot be worshipped in anything made by the hands of human beings. No idols.

2)God has guided history. God has been behind the rise and fall of nations. God's hand is at the helm of things.

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<sup>3</sup> Barclay, William: *The Daily Bible Study, Acts of the Apostles*; Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA 1955 page 143

3) God has made humankind so that instinctively people long for God. There is that in people which make them grope in the darkness after God, because people are children of God and kin to God.

4) The days of groping and ignorance are past. So long as people had to search in the shadows they could not know God and God excused their wayward ways and mistakes; but now God in Christ, the full blaze of the knowledge and revelation of God has come. The days of excuses are past because now the truth of Christ has come.

5) The day of judgement is coming. For humanity life is neither a progress to extinction, as it was to the Epicureans, nor yet a pathway to absorption to God, as it was to the Stoics; it is a journey to the judgement seat of God where Jesus Christ is the judge.

6) The proof of the pre-eminence of Christ is His Resurrection from the dead. It is no unknown God but a

Risen Jesus Christ in whom we are to have faith, and to whom we are to personally relate.<sup>4</sup>

The setting gives Luke, the author of *Acts* an opportunity for an attack upon an evangelistic appeal to Christianity's cultured despisers. Paul becomes a virtual Christian Socrates, first flattering his audience,<sup>5</sup> noting the Athenians are very religious and he relates his passing the altar to an "Un- known God." Idolaters they may have been, but they were searching. Their impulse to worship was right even if their objects of worship were wrong.<sup>6</sup>

Sometimes believers look with scorn upon pagans who criticize the Christian faith as being "simplistic," "pre-scientific," "superstitious," but then they rush to the strange doctrines of astrology, transcendental meditation, parapsychology, esoteric cults, or even happy hearted humanism. And they have the nerve to call Christians "simplistic!" Yet Paul might give them credit as he did on

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* Barclary, William; *Acts* page 143

<sup>5</sup> *Opp. Cit.* The Holy Bible; *Acts* 17:22-23

<sup>6</sup> Willimon, William; *Interpretation, Acts* John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1973 page 142-143

Areopagus, that at least they are searching. The pagans know something else is needed to give meaning to life. Today we in the church rather than pointing our fingers in righteous indignation, should like Paul in Athens, minister to their searching.

Paul continues. He appeals to their knowledge of creation, and to our common humanity. William Williman, Pauline and *Acts* scholar shows us that Paul's great God made the world and everything in it. This God cannot be captured in shrines or idols made by humans. God exists over the face of the whole earth and we can find our purpose in service of the Great God. Now is the time to turn to the One True God! Paul is trying to move them to faith by way of observing the natural world. Look around you. Look up at the stars at night. Look at the colors, how everything fits together in an order.

Yet Paul cannot convert the Athenians through an appeal to their observation of the world. Revelation is needed to take us where observation alone cannot go. We



need faith in Jesus Christ, who showed us in today's Gospel, that He is the way, the truth and the life.<sup>7</sup> In nature, people can look at grass growing green and see only cells dividing, or they can look at the sky and see only gasses, air swirling around. Natural theology cannot go beyond preliminary instruction in matters of faith.

Something else is needed. Paul mentions the Resurrection- an event completely contrary to our observation of the way the world works. In nature things die, decay, decline. Death is death. What is done is done, over and finished, ended. Yet Paul concludes his sermon with the assertion that for Christians, the Resurrection of Jesus is our "assurance." Not grass growing in spring, the return of the robin, the opening of the cocoon, or any other natural phenomenon, Paul states quite clearly, the resurrection, something beyond the natural, is the final assurance that this one Jesus Christ is "Lord of heaven and earth."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The Holy Gospel according to John 14:15-21

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* Acts 17:24

The great Protestant Reformer, John Calvin said: “The human mind is a perpetual factory for idols.”<sup>9</sup> The God whom Paul proclaims is not just another option for human devotion, not an accommodating God, content to be one among many. Our separation of church and state in today's real world is right and the only doctrine to promote fairness, but we have gone so far to the secular, that the putting of all trust in the ways of materialism has brought us to the crisis of the coronavirus. We have neglected the spiritual values side of life. But the God who sent the Christ is still the Holy One of Israel, a jealous deity without rivals, an exclusive lover who tolerates no competition- money, sex, philosophical ideals, institutions- who fiercely judges all idols made by hands or minds of human beings.<sup>10</sup> God will give us another Advocate to beat the destructive virus threatening all life today. God's Spirit will work through the scientists working for a cure.

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<sup>9</sup> Calvin, John; quoted by William Willimon, Acts page 144

<sup>10</sup> Willimon, William H. *Acts*; page 145

This Jesus Christ is a personal judge, who loves you, wants the best for you and is the Savior of all humanity.

*Amen.*

*A PRAYER FOR WELLNESS OF THE HUMAN FAMILY*

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus Christ your Son. You created the world that was good and gave us this land for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness of all men and women. Today we face a terrible coronavirus that has infected the world, making millions of your people in all nations of the world sick with the Covid-19 disease. It has killed countless people. We confess that we the people of the world have neglected our allegiance to you, the God of all people and everything that has life. We repent of all errors of judgement and practice that we have made in this life you have given us. Where we have erred and strayed from your ways, knowingly or unknowingly we are terribly sorry for our shortsightedness and mistakes. We know that all things that you have created have a purpose and meaning, and that all things work together for good in your time. Enlighten the minds and lives of all those working to bring about a cure for treatment and an inoculation that will prevent and end the reign of the terrible disease that now confronts us and threatens us. For the many blessings and life you have given us, we give you grateful thanks. As we go forward with our lives, may we love you and love our neighbors as ourselves, through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*