

THE UNKNOWN GOD

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Recently I was talking to a young mother about baptising her little daughter. She had been part of Junior Church but then had drifted away. "There was nothing in my life" she said 'to make me believe in God". Every minister meets people like that. They may be quite well disposed towards the Christian faith, they may even be life-long church members, but they have no sense of any contact with God. Well what does one say to such a person? Do you say "Don't give up too soon. God has have been absent from your life so far but perhaps one day he'll find time to make contact with you". I find myself saying the exact opposite. Speaking to the Athenians Paul says God is the one in whom we live and move and have our being. We may be unaware of God but there cannot be a human being alive in whose life God is not present.

Cyrus was King of Babylon. He worshipped the pagan gods of Babylon. We still have today inscriptions linking him with the god Marduk. He knew little or nothing of Israel's God and was aware of no relationship with him. None the less in Isaiah 45 v 5 Israel's God says of him. "Though you have not known me, I shall strengthen you". Some people seem to imagine that God does not enter our lives unless he is consciously recognised and received. But the God of the Bible does not have to ask our leave to enter our lives. As William James says: "God is not a gentleman who demands that you call him by the right name". We can no more avoid his presence than we can avoid the air we breathe.

Maybe the problem is the way we think about God. Suppose you define God as "a supernatural being outside the cosmos". Since few of us ever find ourselves outside the cosmos it would hardly be surprising if nothing in our life pointed to such a God.

But suppose you said "God is Spirit". So wherever there is the presence of Spirit there is God. Wherever the spiritual is real there is God. For myself no matter how deep I go into my soul I experience the presence of the Holy and I call that spirit.

Or take greatest definition of God anywhere in the Bible. In 1 John we read "God is love, those who abide in love, abide in God and God in them". That means that whenever love is at work there is God. To use the word God is to speak of the love that binds human beings together with one another, the love that permeates the whole created order, that is present even in the life of the birds as they go forth to feed their young. Whatever I see that love I see God. Above all I see this love in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is why I am a Christian. If I was to take the Jesus story and reduce it into one sentence, I would say that what the Jesus story says to you and me is that there is nothing that you and I can ever do, there is nothing that you and I will ever be, that will separate us from the love of God. We denied him and he loved us, we forsook him and he loved us, we betrayed him and he loved us, we persecuted him and he loved us. We killed him, and he loved us. There is nothing that you can do; there is nothing that you can be that places you beyond the boundaries of the love of God. So we name that love God and we see it primarily in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

For me that love is not just love is not limited and local. I see it in the whole created order. In the fact that is something rather than nothing – in the amazing process of evolution bringing

human life from a single cell, in the wonder and glory of creation. I see that love in Jesus. And I have experienced it in Jesus but lives of people I have known. I hope you've noticed what I've just done. I've given you a quick trot round the doctrine of the Trinity. Every year this church plans someone else here for Trinity Sunday. But this year I've got in first and given it to you before the day.

If God is Spirit, if God is love then God is not just an occasional visitor to our lives but the one in whom we live and love and have our being, and there can be no-one who have life outside the experience of God. There is an answer here to a question that some find perplexing. Cyrus played a creative part in the history of his time. He set free the nations held in captivity in Babylon and let Israel return to Zion. Yet he did not know God. Cyrus is an example of those very many people one knows who live good useful lives, yet have no belief in God whatever. What do you say about such people? Some people would use them as an argument against religion. You see they say you can be a good person without God. But they are not without God. They are examples of what it is to live with an unrecognised God. Listen to the New Testament. "Whoever does good belongs to God". And "Everyone who loves is a child of God and knows God". Dr Jacks once described a friend of his in words which apply to some people I know. "He spent his breath proving that God did not exist, but spent his life proving that he did".

Let us apply this truth now to ourselves. When anyone says I have no personal dealings with God I wonder what it is they mean? I suspect they mean no extraordinary supernatural event has occurred in their life. But is that the usual way that God comes to people?

The story is told of a minister once who was marooned in a flood. He was quite certain God would save him. First a helicopter hovered over him, but the minister gave no signal, for God would find him in his own time. Then a boat passed by and the minister prayed in silence. By now the flood waters were rising higher and the minister was getting anxious and he cried "I wait patiently for your salvation Lord but how long?" A voice came from heaven. "I've already sent my salvation twice, you idiot, and you sent it back both times".

Religion doesn't need an 'R' in the month. You've never seen a vision or heard a heavenly voice. That doesn't mean you haven't met with God. Have you never been tempted to do wrong and found the voice of conscience nagging at the back of your mind? Some people say it's easy to sin and of course in one sense we all know what they mean. But that's not the whole story. For there is an inner prompting towards goodness as well. You do not believe in God, where do you think God is? Only out among the stars? There at the centre of your life, is the real God, the still small voice. Through the years he has been trying to make some of us hear his voice and recognise him. "Though you have not known me, I will strengthen you".

You say you have never had any experience of God. Have you never faced suffering or loss and found from somewhere a strength you did not know you had? Do you remember that poem "Footsteps" in which a person looks back at the path of their life, and there are two sets of footsteps, one theirs and one God's. And they notice that at some points at their life, when they are at their lowest, there is only one set of footsteps, and they ask God, the question I don't understand is why, when I needed you most, you would leave me?" And they get the answer "My child it was then that I carried you". Looking back at your life have you never had the experience when you thought you were alone, but looking back you see God was there? "Though you have not known me, I shall strengthen you". No experience of God – there's not a person who God does not touch.

What follows from this? That we should be content to go through life strengthened by an unrecognised God? This sermon will have been a complete waste of breath if that is the conclusion that everyone draws from it. One of the great experiences of life is when our eyes and know who they unrecognised God.

Think of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. They walk with a stranger on the road unaware of anything out of the ordinary. But as they break the bread “Then their eyes were opened and they recognised him”.

Think of the hymn-writer John Newton talking about his experience

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind but now I see”.

In his autobiography Rabbi Lionel Blue tells how while a student at Oxford he went into the Quaker Meeting House in St Giles. Perhaps you’ve visited its deep wooden panelled room. He sat down and describes himself as being "Sucked into the silence". From time to time someone got up and reminded the Almighty of some distressing current event as if he didn't know about it them but he Lionel Blue just went deeper into the silence. For two months he went to the meeting every week and he says "the silence became deeper and more profound. It began to have a face, a personality, a voice. At one meeting I spoke as well, because it spoke in me". Later he tried to reject God and went through a rather sleazy period. But although he had said no to God, God had not said no to him. Sitting one night in a bar he became deeply aware of God's presence. He says "I heard within myself his commentary on everything around me, and I knew that here was a gateway into the kingdom". Describing the difference it means to know God in this way he says it leads to "freedom, exultation and wonder".

Plato compared human life to men living in a cave who always keep their backs towards the entrance and so only ever see reflections and shadows on never the full blaze of the sun itself. But what if we could turn and see the light? Each of us have a relationship with God. Stop calling that relationship by another name and recognise it for what it is and your life to the wonder and the mystery and the marvel. To each of us God says "Though you have not known me, I will strengthen you". But to know him is life eternal.

Prayer:

Lord, I come to your awesome presence
From the shadows into your radiance;
Search me, try me, consume all my darkness.
Shine on me, shine on me.

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