

# What is the true God like?

Acts 17

I wonder if you've ever had an experience where someone who thinks differently about God, assumes that you think just the same thing. A JW came to our door a couple of weeks back, and when Sam said she was married to a Church of England minister and she was a Christian, they said "oh you're a Christian too, that's great". I remember when I was a teacher, a Muslim boy at school said to me, "Sir, these atheists – they're not like us, people of faith, we're on the same side".

Perhaps you yourself don't quite know what to make of the differences between different faiths. Or between people who perhaps believe in the same God. Our society tries to treat people in two categories – all faiths and no faith. And so you get things like this:



Perhaps you yourself don't quite know what to make of that? You know that the Jews and the Christians both believe in the same God, YHWH, or at least at some point in history they did. Someone has even said to you that Muslims do too – yet you've noticed that the way they think about God seems to be really quite different. Some of you might even know that Jesus said two different and seemingly opposing things about people who did things in his name. He said to his disciples 'anyone who isn't against us is for us' but at another time, he also said 'anyone who isn't for us is against us...'

What are we to make of it?

Recently I was speaking to a freemason who said to me that they basically have a Christian spirituality. It would have been so easy to just say "Yea great, that's great" and so hard to say "well, actually, what about Jesus-this or Jesus-that". You might know people who are spiritualists, who meet in a spiritualist "church". You could even push this conundrum to its most extreme, I know an atheist who talks about "God at work" to describe the beauty of this complex world – and they simply mean that by random chance this beautiful world fell into place without a creator, and we can admire it, isn't it beautiful – that's God.

What are we to make of all this?

Well, today in the book of Acts, we see Jesus' ambassadors, his apostles, the ones He used, gifted and protected in a special way by the Holy Spirit to start the church, answer that question. We're going to spend most of our time thinking about Paul in Athens, but there are a couple of quick lessons from the first two encounters which will help us.

## 1) Don't think about tribes instead of thinking about God

This comes from what we see happen in Thessalonica in the first 9 verses.

Paul arrives there, and as always he *starts* by telling the Jewish people about Jesus, so he goes to the synagogue. v2 “As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures”

He talks and discusses, he debates, he uses logic and simple and clear thinking (he reasons) over three weeks, to tell them about Jesus, their messiah, who had to (and did) die and rise again. So what's the problem?

Even though he was a Jew, even though he was in the synagogue, even though he reasoned from the Jewish scriptures some of the Jews didn't like Paul, why?

Because some people believed Paul about Jesus. Those people became a little group, and the ones who didn't were jealous. It became a “them and us” situation.

We see it with football teams. “**We** beat X yesterday” “**You're** never gonna get in the champions league” “**we'll** beat **you** next time”. What's going on – it's a tribalism. Identifying with a certain group, and not another. It can happen with anything... You can have a loyalty to a brand, or a shopping centre, or a breed of dog: I'm a boarder-collie person, I love them and that's the kind of dog I would have. And it can happen with religions, or within a faith. But when you identify with a tribe instead of with God – when your loyalty is to the people who are 'like me' and God gets forgotten, that's madness.

Look at what they say – When they drag Jason and his friends before the authorities v6 “These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. [here's the key bit] They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king”. Woah – these are Jewish people, saying Caesar is the only king. Do they believe that – probably not, they probably believe that God is their true king. But they are more interested in this dispute, this tribal squabble, than in God. So, I say I'm an Anglican, I love the way the Church of England was established and its aims. I say I'm an evangelical, I think we need to be rooted in what God has said, in scripture. But my loyalty is to God, and I need to be wary of becoming tribal – I hope you will too. Our loyalty is to God, and our measure is him, this is a warning.

But next, in Berea, in the next 6 verses. Here's a positive example:

## 2) Do examine the scriptures to check what you're taught

So Paul has to flee Thessalonica. Actually he wrote them 2 letters to encourage them, which you can read as part of the New Testament. Anyway, he does the same thing he always did he goes straight to the synagogue. But look at v11:

“Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.”

So Paul teaches the same things, he probably goes to the same scriptures, makes the same observations – but the Bereans respond differently. Almost as a group, they take on board what he's saying, and they look at the scriptures, they study, they evaluate, they puzzle through what he's saying?

They look at the scriptures to work out if his teaching is right. The same should be true for us. When you hear someone stand up here and preach – you shouldn't *automatically* believe what they say. I'm not saying you have to be suspicious. But the bible should be our teacher not the preacher – the preacher is just a guide. That's why I point you to look at verses, and why you'll often hear people here at St. Nicholas tell you to keep your bible open. In some churches, the bible is open for the reading, and shut from then on. The Bereans wouldn't have been doing that, and I hope you'll want to follow their example.

If you're not part of a home group – Please, if you can join one. It's one of the most important ways we grow together as a church here at St. Nicholas, people meet once a fortnight to look at the bible and pray together. It also means we get to know each other better and our friendships deepen. The identity course can be a great starter to that, but home groups are more of a long term thing. So those are our first two lessons. Don't think about tribes instead of thinking about God, and examine the scriptures to check what you're taught. And now we reach v16, where Paul arrives in Athens.

But straight away, something is different. v17 "He reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, **as well as in the marketplace** day by day with those who happened to be there"

That's unusual, why is he doing that? Well it tells us in v16 "Paul was **greatly distressed** to see that the city was full of idols"



You can imagine him wandering around Athens, a city full of Temples to different Gods, with statues and shrines everywhere. The great Parthenon, which is so iconic, is a temple to Athena. And Paul isn't wondering around thinking, wow isn't this marvellous, look at this architecture, he's thinking, "oh no, isn't this terrible – loads of people are worshipping false Gods, they're living for a lie, their deceived".

An ancient writer, Gaius Petronius Arbiter, who wrote ancient comedy (satire) said "it was easier to find a god than a man in Athens". Extraordinary!

And so Paul breaks his routine, he starts, straight away, trying to tell people about Jesus, anywhere, everywhere. I guess he's shouting out, street preaching if you like.

And because he's not a nutter, what he's saying is logical, reasoned, clear and makes sense. The local philosophers invite him to speak at their little gathering in the Areopagus, where he stands up and begins to speak.

And that brings us to our third lesson, and the most substantial one.

### 3) Learn what the God you believe in is actually like.

Because in v22 he stands up to speak, and he starts – “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious”. And some people think this is a positive start – it’s not, it’s not positive. He’s scathing of them.

He says “as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. You are ignorant of the very thing you worship!”. He’s upset, and shocked, and he says – you don’t even know what the God you worship is like, you even say it yourselves. I’m going to tell you.

Let me tell you what God, THE God, is like. And I want to talk you through how he describes God. He wants them to know what the true God is like, specifically, he is really different from what the people of Athens believe. They may believe in God, or worship a God, but he’s not this God, he’s not like this. And as I take us through what he says – people of St. Nicholas, this is our God too!

#### 1. God is Creator

v24 The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth.

So everything you see and touch, the sounds the sights, it’s all made by the true God, he is creator. Wow, isn’t he amazing!

#### 2. God is not confined

End of v24 “and [God] does not live in temples built by human hands”

That’s what many people thought, the equivalent of saying – Church is God’s place, that’s where he is. If you want to meet with God you need to go to church.

That’s nonsense, you can meet God anywhere – he isn’t confined, the whole world is his, he made it, how could he be confined within it? He’s everywhere.

God is in the lowest depths of the ocean where we can’t go, he’s in the farthest reaches of space which we don’t even know about – God is not confined, he’s everywhere.

#### 3. We need him, he doesn’t need us

v25 [God] is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else”

As Paul looked around Athens, the temple priests were bowing and fanning and feeding their Gods. He thinks, this is madness – God doesn’t need people, these gods these people are worshipping are so weak, and don’t they see it. God is not like that!

Wonderfully he does use people, in fact our God loves to use people – but he doesn’t need us, quite the opposite. We need him. Every breath you take, says Paul, is by God’s divine choice and gift. We will often talk about divine intervention. Perhaps you are aware that God helped you to remember something really important just in time. Perhaps he saved you from a near-accident. Well actually God sustains us even more than that – every step, every breath, every moment...

God keeps gravity working, he keeps light moving, he keeps hearts beating, lungs breathing, he keeps food tasting good, he keeps colours looking bright or sharp. We need him, so totally and completely. God doesn't need us!

#### 4. God rules over history

v26 says "[God] made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history, and the boundaries of their lands"

God marked it all out, he's in control of history. He made the British Empire rise, and brought it down. He raised up the USA to the power it has. He is the God of history. God marks out the path of your life too, if you find a job opportunity pops up, the door just seems to open for you – that's him.

If you find an opportunity is taken away, the door closes – that's him too... and

#### 5. The right response to this kind of God is to seek him

You see, some might find that scary, but look at v27 "God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him"

When you realise how powerful God is, how powerless in many ways we are, what we supposed to do, is seek him. That's what God wants us to do, that's what we're designed to do. I wonder if you do?

At times life can feel overwhelming, and so much seems to hit you at once... do you seek God? Or do you try to sort it all our yourself? We can be so self-reliant sometimes, that's not good. We're supposed to seek God. Some people don't seek after God because they think – "he's so big, and I'm so small, what would be the point of trying to get to know God or what he's like?"

But Paul says

#### 6. God is not a Distant God

The end of v27 "though he is **not** far from any one of us"

And then he says – even your own poets say this, people know it, it's not a shock to you, God isn't distant. So seek him! And then, after all that, Paul begins to tell them about Jesus, this is the climax, what he's been building up to. With all he said about God the father – some people who aren't Christians may be able to agree. But in v31 he explains how the climax of the whole thing is Jesus defeating death, rising again, and now being seated on the throne in heaven.

Jesus was God come to earth, and Jesus is God ruling over earth.

He rose again, and you will rise again too, and when you stand before the throne, Jesus will be in it, and his opinion is the one which will matter.

v31 "God has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed [Jesus]. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead

So what does this mean? Why is it so important? Paul warns them, Jesus won't stand for people worshipping these fake gods, goes who are not gods at all! One day he will judge, and those who worship these idols, weak and limp and ineffective as they are, one day they will be judged.

So lastly, Paul commands them, repent! Or rather, God does v30

#### 4) You must make a decision to repent and follow Jesus.

v30 says this "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent"

So, as I took us through all those things about God, you might have wanted me to slow down, and that's fair enough, I took us through a lot of huge ideas there, just as Paul did! But notice one of the reactions which the men of Athens have.

We were told in v21 (look at v21) (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

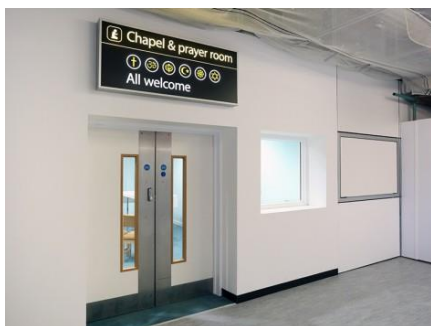
All talk and no action. We get the impression they love to talk about ideas, they love to be up to date, and clever. And after Paul's speech, some of them say v32 "We want to hear you again on this subject." But they don't get to – Paul leaves v33, and he doesn't go back...

Why would he leave if they were eager to know more about Jesus, eager to study?

I think, they're not. They just love ideas, and love thinking and playing with ideas in their heads. All talk, no action.

There comes a point where you've got to repent and follow Jesus. Not just keep listening and thinking, listening and thinking. It's make your mind up time! That time has to come. And Paul says for them, that time is right away. "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent" Not just, this is the good choice/that's the bad choice, but God commands all people to repent, which includes you, if you're a Christian, or not a Christian.

I wonder if you're aware that that time has come for you?



So where does that leave the Jehovah's witnesses? Where does that leave the Jews, the Buddhists, the atheists? I started off by showing you this picture

Well, some of those groups just don't know what God is like, like God is not confined, he rules over history and so on – they don't know that – so if they believe in a god, he's very different, he's not the true God.

Some, like JW's for example might come closer, but sadly, very sadly, they would reject Jesus. The climax of God revealing himself! They don't think he's God come to earth in human form, they don't see that he's on the throne in heaven now, one who should be worshipped. And so they reject God's offer to mankind

Jesus is the one on whom our faith stands or falls. Take the spiritualists, they can be more interested in people who've died than the son of God who died, the saviour who died and rose again. It becomes a faith which serves me, and is about me.

Paul teaches about God to get us to lift our eyes, outside of ourselves, and see how big God is, and see the climax of a risen saviour, seated on the throne, Jesus Christ.

He is the true God, he is to be worshipped,

So may what we've seen today help you to do that, and to clear in your thinking and devotion to him. Amen