

The Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 11, 2026

Text: Acts 17:16-31

"God for Real"

Late in the 1980's an Irish rock band became famous singing these words:

I have climbed highest mountains,
I have run through the fields,
Only to be with you,
Only to be with you.
I have run, I have crawled,
I have scaled these city walls,
These city walls,
Only to be with you.
But I still haven't found what I'm looking for. (U2)

They were looking for God but not really able to find Him. As Paul walked along the streets of Athens in 50 AD, he saw that the Greeks were in the same predicament. That great city was certainly a religious hotbed, a true marketplace for divinity. Gods? You bet they had gods to worship! There were temples and altars for the worship of every god that they had ever heard of. They even had one for a god of whom they had yet to hear. The sight of the city filled with idols gave Paul a pain in his gut. Everywhere he looked, the apostle saw rumours and hints of God, but nowhere did he see the truth!

In Athens, Paul met with fellow Jews in their synagogues to preach Christ on Sabbaths, and the rest of the time, he conversed with people on the city streets and told them His Lord's story. Now these days, most

people consider it bad form to talk about religion, but the Greeks of Paul's day were an open-minded, curious bunch, and they loved to talk about matters spiritual and philosophical. They even had a place set aside for large groups to gather for such discussions; it was known as the Areopagus, because it was built on the hill of Ares, the Greek god of war. Some of the philosophers who spoke with Paul invited him there to give a lecture.

The apostle was gentle and respectful in his speech, for he was a guest among the Athenians. He acknowledged the remarkable religiosity displayed by all of their temples, but he also reasoned with them to expose their spiritual ignorance. He referred to the altar he had seen, dedicated to an Unknown God. Though Athens boasted of having a representative of every imaginable of religion, they had set up this altar just in case they had missed one. This was clever, and ironically revealing of the fact that for all their religiosity, they remained in the dark about God.

Nevertheless, Paul chose that altar as the touchpoint for his sermon. *"What therefore, you worship as unknown, this I will proclaim to you."* He preached God the Maker of heaven and earth. God needs no man-made temple as His dwelling place on earth; He inhabits His whole creation. He doesn't satisfy His hunger with the meat of sacrifices offered on man-made altars, for He upholds and sustains all that He has made. God created humanity from one man, and He oversees the rise and fall of all the human nations on earth. He reigns over all, so no human work, no statue or

image, even though it be of precious silver or gold, can rightfully represent God.

Such idols insult Him. They expose the spiritual foolishness of those who trust in them, and they bring God's judgment upon them. Therefore, Paul called his hearers to repent of their trust in their false gods before the time comes when His own appointed Judge metes out eternal punishment on all who cling to idols. For the True God has provided salvation for all people, and He signalled this by raising Jesus from the dead.

What does ancient Athens have in common with contemporary Canada? In our current, multi-cultural society, we rub shoulders with people of many faiths who worship many gods in many houses of worship. Religious tolerance thrives among us as a civic virtue that allows Canadians to live together in peace, despite our differing faiths. Its greatest weakness though, is its tendency to tempt us to acquiesce with the belief that all faiths are essentially the same and equally true. That dubious stance takes no religion or its god seriously, and it really uses them all as a cover for our sinful longing to be gods ourselves.

Today, we no longer seek the favour of the gods of our own imagining, so we don't sculpt images of great gods for worship or make bloody sacrifices to please them. But for quite some time now, human endeavor has been focused instead on creating technologies that promise to free us from the limitations that life places on us. We have invented

medicines that have saved the lives of millions; this is good, a gift of God, in fact, but such progress is usually only lauded as proof of humanity's power to overcome sickness and death. We fly planes around the world and rockets to the moon and back. We compete against each other in sports, fully expecting that we will never cease to improve our performance. We have built weapons of terrifyingly destructive strength, putting our whole race at risk. We are creating computers with powers far beyond that of our own minds, not really knowing who will be able to control them. With medical breakthroughs like birth control, we have and continue to redefine our social institutions. Marriage is no longer held as the sacred home of sexual activity; consensual relationships are accepted as a valid alternative, or at least a natural prelude to marriage. Heterosexual marriage is no longer seen as normative; all manner of other relationships are celebrated. Even the natural state of male and female is challenged, promising that we can be whatever gender we can imagine.

Where once the Athenians believed that the gods could be whatever they imagined them to be, our generation is bewitched by the vainer conviction that we can be whatever kind of god we want to be. Our world needs to hear God's wake up call just as surely as did Paul's hearers in the Areopagus. The second psalm sounds that alarm loud and clear:

¹Why do the nations rage

and the peoples plot in vain?

²The kings of the earth set themselves,

and the rulers take counsel together,

against the Lord and against his anointed, saying,

*³“Let us burst their bonds apart
and cast away their cords from us.”*

*⁴He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the Lord holds them in derision.*

*⁵Then he will speak to them in his wrath,
and terrify them in his fury, saying,*

*⁶“As for me, I have set my King
on Zion, my holy hill.”*

⁷I will tell of the decree:

*The Lord said to me, “You are my Son;
today I have begotten you.*

*⁸Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.*

*⁹You shall break them with a rod of iron
and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.”*

*¹⁰Now therefore, O kings, be wise;
be warned, O rulers of the earth.*

*¹¹Serve the Lord with fear,
and rejoice with trembling.*

*¹²Kiss the Son,
lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,
for his wrath is quickly kindled.*

Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

God is God, and we are not. He could justly annihilate us for our unbelieving, rebellious, striving to call the shots in life. Instead, God's mercy moved Him to save us from the destruction we deserve. He became one of us to break the chains of our unbelief through the offering of His innocent life to take away our guilt and shield us from His holy anger. Jesus, God's only begotten Son, was set to hang upon a cross on Zion's holy hill to die for us, so that we might die through Him to our stubborn unbelief and evil pride. God raised Him up from the dead and set Him to reign with Him from heaven until the day that He comes to completely break His enemies with the iron rod of His Word and to reign forever as the Holy Refuge of all who trust in Him.

Through Baptism, we live, reconciled with the Father, through Jesus, His Son, by the Holy Spirit's gracious power. In this world so god-obsessed yet God-ignorant, we know the True God who gives us life, meaning, purpose and security through faith in Jesus Christ, His Crucified and Risen Son. What a gift we have been given! Praise the Lord! We also know that Christ did not die only for us; by His death and resurrection, Jesus has reconciled the whole world to the God who loves us.

Though we are not all apostles or missionaries sent to the ends of the earth to preach Christ, yet we are His people, His royal priesthood and holy nation, and God has called us to serve Him all of our days through faithful worship and loving service to our families, friends, co-workers, strangers, and enemies. We love them deeply by praying that the Holy Spirit will give

them the opportunity to hear of Jesus, and that He will create in them believing hearts that receive His saving grace. Trusting in the Holy Spirit, we heed Peter's encouragement: "in [our] hearts [we] regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks [us] for a reason for the hope that is in us" (1 Peter 3:15).

God wants to be known by all people; He made us for just that purpose. Through Christ, He has made peace with the world, having redeemed us all from sin and death. Through His Word confessed by believers like us, the Spirit calls our neighbours from the darkness of idolatry to live in the light of His mercy and truth now and forever. So we are lights for Christ in this world, lights that befriend, invite, and welcome those who still search in the dark for God. In Christ, we have been given all that we need, all that we need to look for in the this life and the next. How blessed we are to take refuge in Him! Amen.