

Late

It is hard for us to appreciate the missionary zeal of the early Christians. Today we hear the story of St. Paul who is in Athens. Athens is about 1200 kms from Jerusalem by air or 3000 kms by driving (33 hour drive, keeping in mind no cars). It would be the equivalent of traveling from Calgary to Ottawa by camel or by foot. I highlight the extreme distances traveled by the early Christians because it demonstrates the extreme love and zeal they had of proclaiming the one true God.

St. Paul is in Athens right now because it was no longer safe for him due to the persecution of the Jews to be in northern Greece. So the Christians sent him to southern Greece in Athens 500 km away just to make sure.

However, Paul does not let this time of safety pass away without revealing the mystery of our God. Paul was invited by the people of Athens to come up to the Areopagus which was a hill which was dedicated to the Ares the god of war. So in that area, Paul began to wage war against the plethora of idols and he makes a very interesting observation.

He said, "I looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown God.'"

Historically, the Greeks had honored specific gods for saving them from fires or floods or earthquakes. However, there was one instance in 6th century Athens when a plague had ravaged the city and the other gods seemed to have abandoned them so they prayed to this 'unknown god'. When the plague was lifted, they wanted to honor this unknown god for saving them so they built an altar to honor and remember this 'god'.

This is a very interesting observation on a historical level, but on a spiritual level it reveals the yearning of their hearts. There are two aspects to this observation: the objects of their worship (idols) and the altar to the 'unknown god.'

The objects of their worship (idols) represent what they knew about god, yet at the same time the altar to the unknown god represented what they did not know about god. It represents the fact that they knew something or thought they knew something of the mystery of god, yet at the same time they had no idea and knew that there was something more.

This principle reminds me of St. Augustine. St. Augustine was a man who had his objects of worship (power through knowledge and lust), yet at the same time there was this unknown god of his heart, this unknown god of his desires.

Reflecting upon his life as a young man who engaged in his lustful appetites he writes:

I strayed further from Thee, and Thou lettest me alone, and I was tossed about...and I boiled over in my fornications, and Thou heldest Thy peace...and I wandered further and further from Thee...with a proud dejectedness, and a restless weariness.

But when he encounters the unknown God of his heart, the unknown God who gave him his restless heart, St. Augustine uttered these beautiful words:

Late have I loved thee O beauty ever ancient, ever new! Late have I loved thee!

The word late is so significant because it is as if he were saying, "I wish I loved you sooner. I wish I knew your beauty earlier instead of wasting my love on my false objects of worship. Your beauty is of ancient origin but the depths of its mystery is always new. I wish I loved you sooner."

Today, our God does not want to be an unknown God to us. He gives us his Spirit of truth so that we may know him. Holy Spirit of truth guide me into all truth, into the inexhaustible mystery of the Father through the Son, the inexhaustible mystery of the beauty ever ancient, yet ever new. May you grant us a deeper knowledge of you so that you do not become an unknown god to us and so that we may never waste any opportunity to know you and to love you more.