



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity, September 9th, 2012

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
And of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

The most prolific bank robber of the 20th Century was a man called Willie Sutton. One day when he was being carted off to jail after a foiled bank robbery, a reporter shouted: "Why do you rob banks, Mr. Sutton?" Smiling, Sutton replied: "That's where the money is."

The apostle St. Paul, on his missionary journeys, worked on much the same principle. Whenever he arrived at a new city, his first stop was always the local synagogue – because that's where people who knew the scriptures were to be found.

He would usually spend a couple of days at the synagogue preaching and teaching, explaining how the scriptures foretold the coming of Jesus Christ. Often he'd make converts, sometimes the entire congregation. But he'd also invariably make a few enemies too – and they would try to arrest him, like Willie Sutton, or run him out of town.

He followed the same pattern when he arrived in Athens, having been chased out of the city of Berea. But after teaching in the synagogue for a few days, he decided to try his luck with the students and faculty at Athens University. It might take you by surprise that there were universities all those years ago. But it's rather arrogant to imagine folks 2,000 years ago were unaware of the benefits of higher education.

There were universities all over the Roman world, most of them started by Greek educators hundreds of years before. The three top schools

were Athens, Rhodes and Alexandria. In the Roman world, just like our Ivy League today, an education at any one of them opened doors to a career in law, politics and civil government.

Of the three universities, Alexandria was by far the richest. It was heavily endowed by the Ptolemies, the Greek dynasty that ruled Egypt after the death of Alexander the Great. It boasted the biggest, most comprehensive library in the world and its research facilities and classroom were lavishly equipped. Even so, it was regarded as bit of an upstart, a Johnny Comelately like Johns Hopkins.

The school with the most distinguished history and greatest social cachet was the University of Athens. It was not only ancient but its alumni included some of the towering intellects of the Greek and Roman world, including Plato and Socrates (So-Krates, in *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*). And one of its distinguished former faculty members was a philosopher and scientist named Aristotle, who 400 years earlier, had demonstrated, beyond all reasonable doubt, the existence of God.

Universities, back then, were just as well aware as they are today of the benefits of good public relations. And the faculty at Athens encouraged their alumni to put up monuments to the school's great men to remind folks of the institution's long and distinguished lineage. And among the monuments erected in tribute to the great Aristotle was an altar to the God whose existence he had proved.

There was only one drawback to this: Aristotle made it clear that God's powers and properties are so different from ours there is no way human beings can know him or understand him unless he specifically reveals himself to us. In other words, unless God reveals himself to us, he is completely unknowable. But this presented no obstacle to Athens' fundraisers. The towering achievement of the institution's most famous son was memorialized with an altar labeled: "*To The Unknown God*"

Paul was a Jew, but he was also a well-educated Greek from the city of Tarsus in the Roman Province of Asia Minor. He was a Rabbi who knew the scriptures like the back of his hand. But he was equally familiar with the teachings of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, as well as the fashionable Epicurian and Stoic philosophical schools. Thus he was uniquely equipped to preach the gospel in a university town where folks worshipped their intellects far more than they worshipped God.

At first the philosophy professors dismissed Paul as superstitious and a babbler. But the Athenians, like most intellectuals, adore novelty and eventually he was invited to the Aeropagus – Athens' equivalent of the Oxford Union – to expound on his "new doctrine." Paul swiftly turned the tables on them.

"Gentlemen," he said, "You call me superstitious, but it's you, in fact, that are the superstitious ones – worshipping a God you don't know at all. During my visits, I have been watching you worship at the altar inscribed "To The Unknown God." I can now introduce you to this unknown god of yours . . . He has revealed himself to all mankind in the person of Jesus Christ."

Most Greek intellectuals were at least passingly familiar with Jewish Scriptures. They had been translated into Greek for the University of

Alexandria 200 hundred years before. And Paul related the prophecies about the Messiah to Jesus Christ and his ministry and explained how Aristotle's unknown God was revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.

This wasn't so difficult. After all, it's hard to imagine any one who behaves less like human being generally behave than Jesus. And what could be more difficult to comprehend than God sacrificing his own son on the cross to atone for the sins of creatures he created. It is a degree of altruism that can only be described as divine.

Paul's arguments converted a number of leading Athens' intellectuals to Christ – including a highly distinguished professor called Dionysius the Aeropagite, and a woman called Damaris. (Athens University was in those days an equal opportunity institution). However St. Luke records: "When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked."

You might think it illogical that they mocked. While it might be impossible for a human being to resurrect the dead, it is well within the capabilities of the almighty Unknown God of their intellectual idol, Aristotle. But then what does logic matter when an Unknown God is so much more comfortable than one you know.

There is no escaping the authority of a God you know. You have no alternative but to accept that you ignore the rules he makes at your peril. But with an Unknown God, it's quite different. If you don't know who he is and what he is like, how can you know his rules? It means you're free to make up the rules for yourself.

It is our original sin: It's the temptation the serpent used to entice Eve into eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge: "Thou shalt no surely die; for the Lord God doth know that in the day ye shall eat there of ye shall be as Gods knowing good and evil." *AMEN.*