



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord, December 24th, 2016

Commonly called Christmas Eve & Christmas Day

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

Just shy of 2,400 years ago, one of the smartest men who have ever lived embarked on a scientific study of a question that has vexed humanity since we acquired the capacity to think. The man was named Aristotle and the question was: Does God exist? The instrument he brought to bear on the subject was his own sharply honed mind. And his conclusion: "God most certainly exists. However, because he is so vastly different from us – eternal, infinite, all powerful, all-knowing, etc. – it would be impossible for us to know him unless he chose to reveal himself to us."

Aristotle was ideally equipped to explore the question. He was the preeminent philosopher/scientist of Greece's classical age. A polymath, his interests spanned a dizzying array of subjects, including physics, biology, zoology, metaphysics, logic, ethics, aesthetics, poetry, theater, music, rhetoric, linguistics, politics and government. Indeed, his extraordinary, wide ranging intellect brought into being the first comprehensive system of Western philosophy. A measure of the regard in which he was held can be gauged by the fact that after Plato's death in 343 BC, King Philip of Macedon appointed him tutor to his son, the future Alexander the Great.

Aristotle's study and findings electrified the intellectuals of the classical world. Belief in the vast pantheon of capricious gods and goddesses traditionally invoked to explain creation was rapidly waning. Eventually universities all over the Ancient World – including Athens, Rhodes and Alexandria, the Ivy League of the time – each dedicated altars to Aristotle's "Unknown God." Not only was it rather more satisfying intellectually to have a more rational

explanation for how things came to be, it was also decidedly convenient to worship a god whose motives and interests were utterly unknown. After all, until he actually chose to reveal himself and his plan for mankind, nobody was obliged to obey him.

This, then, was still the situation some 400 years later when a Jewish rabbi strode into the Agora on the rocky crag in Athens known as the Areopagus – the location of the Athens University philosophy department and, of course, its altar to Aristotle's "Unknown God."

The rabbi was a man on a mission. An intellectual in much the same class as Aristotle, he was uniquely learned in both Hebrew theology and Greek philosophy. "Men of Athens, I see you have an altar dedicated to Aristotle's Unknown God," he began. "I am now able to reveal him to you in the person of Jesus Christ."

He then went on to detail how very different Aristotle's hitherto Unknown God, Jesus Christ incarnate, is from the rest of humanity. And the revelation of that difference begins with the event we are celebrating tonight.

Not least, Christmas celebrates the fact that God – ineffable, infinite, eternal, omnipresent, all powerful, the God who created not just the world, but the whole universe by merely uttering a word – loves each and every one of us, the beings he created, to a degree that is far beyond our imagining.

This is something that we, today, take for granted, but

back then, in First Century Athens, it was an idea that would have been considered totally outlandish. After all, unknown or not, a God was expected to act, well, like God. That means he was expected to be capricious, violent and lustful like the ancient gods and goddesses, or, alternatively, for the more sophisticated, a righteous judge, sternly punishing evildoers, and rewarding the pious, the virtuous and the courageous.

The Unknown God St. Paul presented to the philosophy faculty of Athens University was nothing like that – certainly not a fearsome warrior with a razor sharp sword, nor, for that matter, a terrifying magician whose wonders would give his creatures no option but to cower in fear.

Instead he came to the people he, himself, had created as a savior and in the most vulnerable condition imaginable: a human baby. In fact, God loves us so much he entrusted his only begotten son to our loving care. And all you need to do to grasp the enormity of God's love is to think of humanity's murderous track record over the centuries.

And the reason he gave us his only begotten son is precisely because of that ghastly track record. God loves us so much that when we had dug ourselves a hole so deep we had no chance of digging ourselves out, he did something no human would dream of doing. He sent us his only begotten Son – perfect God, perfect man – the only person qualified to pay the penalty for the sins we have committed – not only against one another, but, most importantly, against God himself.

Indeed, nobody could be more different from an ordinary human being than Jesus Christ. Despite his divinity, he is a man utterly without pretensions. He rarely associated with the high and mighty or with the clergy, for that matter. But rather he spent his time with the common people – such as his disciples, and sinners like apostate Jews and the hated tax collectors.

What's more, while the Gospels show that, intellectually speaking, he was head and shoulders above everyone he associated with, yet he never lost patience with them or patronized them. Certainly, he took hypocritical clergymen and religious lawyers to task, but largely in a gentle, good natured fashion, preferring to best them in debate – as in "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and unto God that which is God's."

All of his thoughts and actions, in fact, were aimed at helping other people. He never used any of his

limitless powers to help himself. Even when nobody was about, he declined to use his limitless power to turn a stone into bread to satisfy his hunger.

Even when performing truly spectacular miracles – raising someone from the dead, for instance – he was downright prosaic about it. "Little girl, get up," he said, bringing a religious leader's daughter back to life. And at Lazarus' graveside, he simply shouted: "Hey Lazarus, come out."

Today this divine modesty still seems odd when judged by human standards. And it most certainly seemed so to those Athenian philosophers back in the First Century. Indeed, they immediately fell into a heated debate on the subject.

But then, the idea that our great, all-powerful God loves creatures as inconsequential so much that he died for us. Still has the capacity to shock. And so it should. After all, we find it difficult to genuinely love any one other than ourselves – let alone love somebody sufficiently to sacrifice our lives for them for them.

But our standards are not God's standards. Jesus tells us that we must love our fellow men just as much as we love ourselves. What's more, with infinite generosity, he says that if we do this, it will actually count as loving him.

That is quite stunning when you pause to think about it. But, then, God made us not just because loving somehow makes him feel good love, but because he actually is love – love personified. It is his very essence. As such, he made us to love us and to give us the pleasure of loving him.

Christmas, for all its warmth and good cheer, confronts us with the enormity of the gulf between our human standards and the standards of God our creator. The greatest of all God's mysteries, you see, is not the creation of heaven and earth and all that therein is. It isn't the parting of the Red Sea, the raising of Lazarus, the virgin birth or the resurrection.

St. John explained the great mystery in these words: "So God loved the world that he gave his only-begotten son to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Now that's something to be really merry about. *AMEN*

And from all of us at St. Stephen, here's wishing a very merry Christmas and the happiest of New Years.
AMEN