

Fooling Ourselves

Some years ago I had the privilege of walking the streets of Pompeii, Herculaneum and parts of Rome famous for their ancient architecture. Some of you may have had similar experiences while on holiday around the Mediterranean. While I am, at heart, a volcanologist (someone interested in volcanoes) I could not help but be impressed by the preserved buildings and the masses of public art. It seems that anyone who was anyone had art and statues – in their homes and gardens, in their public meeting areas, at the side of the road. Statues of local dignitaries, heroes, animals – real and imaginary and, of course, multiple gods and goddesses. Not just their own national gods either but representations of gods from the known world.

Paul, of course, in his travels could not help but notice these idols and uses them as a way to engage with the people of Athens. They did indeed have many many gods; great and small; and many many temples and shrines built to their honour. Pagan Gods were notoriously jealous, prideful and vindictive – heaven forbid you should offend one by not giving them their due. Hence the altar to the 'unknown god' that Paul refers to; probably built just in case they had accidentally left one out that might be offended.

To be fair they didn't believe that the various god and godlings actually inhabited the statues but they did believe that they were a conduit – a telephone box – to the deity they were built to honour. If you wanted a favour from a particular god or you felt that you needed to pacify one, you would go to the shrine, leave an offering – tip the local priest – and make your way back home hoping that said god would take pity on you.

Paul was trying to get his audience to let go of their old understandings and embrace a brand new vision of a relationship with one all-embracing God. That was a big ask and most couldn't get their heads round it at first.

Jesus had the same problem with his followers. They and we hold tightly to our worldly god images.

Now a very reasonable question would be – What on earth does Tracy mean by that? Let me try and explain.

Too often we treat God in the same way that the Romans or Greeks treated their gods. Thunderstorm? Quick pray to Zeus/Jupiter to be saved. Going into battle? Quick offering to Ares/Mars to ensure victory. Found a water source? Chuck a few coins at the local nymph that looks after it. It is all superficial, worldly. There is no engagement, no relationship, no deeper understanding. We treat God as a statue that we can visit every now and then and, if we pay enough tribute, he will stay out of our way the rest of the time.

That, of course, is not how God works; though, sadly, it is how some people approach him.

Jesus and Paul, however, challenge us to desire and expect more. Jesus speaks of the Advocate, we use the term 'Holy Spirit'. Not an external distant god but one that lives within us – not to control or demand – but to love, support and guide. A God that is with us through all and in all, everywhere we go, in every moment of every day.

Do we truly believe that God, through the Holy Spirit, is with us all the time? A God who will rejoice with us, cry with us, sit with us, simply be with us? A God who is with us as we hang out the washing as much as he is with us when we take time to pray? A God who needs nothing from us but gives and gives and gives of himself? Closer than a lover, more understanding than a best friend?

... The trouble is, that to have God so close, so intimate, you have to accept that there is no hiding the stuff you are ashamed of. You can't pretend that you didn't think what you thought about (whoever) or do (whatever) when no one was looking. We feel exposed and guilty – and no one likes that either – so we go back to pretending that God is a statue, out there, controlled and safely distant.

It's a bit daft really – God does know everything and pretending he doesn't is just us fooling ourselves, all we are doing is denying ourselves the comfort of his presence – but no one said human beings were smart.

And so, as always, it is our choice – a worldly, cold, statuesque god that we try to keep at a distance or God, as he really is, loving, compassionate, supportive and ever present. Statues are all well and good I suppose but who wouldn't prefer a warm loving hug. I know which one I want. What about you?

I think we all want that – who wouldn't – all we have to do is accept it. That's it. Seriously – that is it.

There are those who think you have to say some sort of prayer – well you can if you want, if it will help, but it isn't necessary.

I suppose it is one of those catch 22 things – to feel God's presence you need to have faith in God's presence which helps you feel God's presence. You have to make that leap of faith in the first place. God is there for everyone – but only those who have faith can know the wonder and joy of his presence.