

If I say the word bridge what comes to mind? What about flower? Words bring ideas and pictures to our minds. But what if I say God? What comes to mind then?

Most people think about God from time to time. Even the atheists with their advert seem only to be able to say "Probably God doesn't exist". We all do think about God so what do you think?

In the passage we had read from the Bible earlier we heard about Paul. Now Paul was a great leader of the early Christian church. Here he was on tour and he's pitched up in Athens. Now there again I mention the word and I'm sure our minds begin to work - you may even have been to Athens or just seen pictures of the Acropolis and Parthenon. Well Paul was there as a missionary bringing the story of Jesus to the people.

As he wandered round the city he noticed that they were pretty religious. They had temple after temple to all kinds of different gods. So taken up were they in Athens with their gods that they even had an altar to the unknown god.

But what struck home with Paul was that they didn't really know God at all. For all their temples and all the finery and worship God was unknown to many of them. And indeed here today God may be unknown to many of us.

Paul could tell that they didn't know God by what he saw around him in that great city.

He could see that they had built these elaborate and often ornate temples for their gods to live in. He could see that they did so much to care for their gods, bringing them food and drink, cleaning them and looking after them. But he could also see that their gods didn't seem to do much. In fact their gods seemed a bit remote and uninterested.

In some senses we see the same with the guinea pig we've had in church this morning. Vicki has it and she has bought a nice hutch for it to live in. I'm sure she feeds it and cleans it out and does all that is necessary for it to be well. But really you don't get an awful lot from a guinea pig. They don't even wag their tail or squeak when you come in. They don't do much.

The reality with the guinea pig is that Vicki is in control, not the pigs. The reality in Athens was that the people were in control and the gods were really nothing.

Paul in what he had to say to them began to introduce them to the real God and I want to try and do the same this morning just for a few minutes.

The first point Paul made was that it is not we humans who make a home for God but God who has made a home for us. Can you see that in v24? "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands." God has made this great world for us. He is the creator and we are the creatures not the other way round. They couldn't have got it more wrong could they?

And that is surprising because so often creation speaks to us of the creator. As we thank God for George and Joseph this morning the very fact of their birth makes us aware that life and its beginning is a mystery - a mystery that speaks to us, if we will listen, of the God who is the author of all life - the creator God.

Then as we see the wonders of creation, the mountains, seas, sunsets and so on their grandeur point us to a creator God. God as creator has made us a home not the other way round.

The Christian faith is all about relationship, the relationship between us and God and here is the starting point of that relationship, in which we recognise he is God and we are his creatures, his people. He has made the world and he has made us not the other way round.

And that means he has the right to rule over our lives but so often we reject God. We won't allow him any part of our lives. That rebellion is what the Bible means when it uses the word sin. It's not just about doing things wrong but our whole attitude which refuses to allow God any part in our lives even though he is our creator. That kind of attitude hurts God.

The second point is that it is God who looks after us humans not the other way round. So in the next verse, v25 "And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else." God is not some kind of celestial guinea pig that we need to look after. Having made us God, as we saw earlier with the children, is involved in our lives caring for us and providing for us. So not only is he our creator he is, as the Bible points out over and over again, our heavenly Father. I wonder when I mentioned the word God earlier is that what came to mind? Perhaps not but if not then let me introduce you to my Heavenly Father, the one who made you and I and who cares for you and I.

The third point for Paul was that God is not distant but actually very close, as a Father should be. So v27, "God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us." God is accessible Paul was saying. He is not some remote being with whom we can have little or no contact. He is not made out of stone and therefore unable to hear or respond. We can know God and we can have a relationship with him and that is because of Jesus.

God has shown himself in Jesus and as we listen to and look at Jesus we see God and we know God.

Did you realise that? Were you aware that we can see and know God in and through Jesus? Here is the one who is God and yet became man so that we might see and know God.

There is no need for an altar to an unknown God because God has shown himself in Jesus.

But there is a problem in that because of the way we have lived our lives, ignoring God and shutting him out of our thinking and acting we have cut ourselves off from God. So that, while he may be close there is a barrier between us. We experience this often in our lives when relationships go wrong and we can't sort it out.

So we through our sin are cut off from our heavenly Father but he has done something about it.

Let me explain.

I want you to imagine that this book represents the life story of any of us here this morning, from the day of your birth until the day of your death.

In this book is recorded each occasion we have broken any of God's laws - every wrong deed, every wrong word, every evil thought. For example, Jesus says to hate another person is as bad as murder according to God's outlook. To lust after another person is to commit adultery in the heart. In my book are many pages and I'm sure if you are honest you'd say the same.

Now suppose this hand represents you, and let us say that the ceiling represents God. Now the Bible says that between us and God is what the Bible calls 'the unfavourable record of our debts'. So our sins separate us from God. In fact, the Scriptures say that God is so pure that even if only one line was written in this book - that would be enough to separate you from God.

But, as we have been seeing, sin is more than doing, saying or thinking wrong things. It is an attitude of rebellion against God, whereby we ignore Him and run our lives our own way. Let me make the picture even blacker. The Bible says that, although God is love, he is also a just judge. God hates all evil and *must* punish our sin. One prophet in the Bible describes God in this way: 'Your eyes are too holy to look at evil, and you cannot stand the sight of people doing wrong' (Habakkuk 1:13).

So we have two problems. First, we all have much evil written in our books. Second, God must punish all our evil.

Now, let me try to illustrate what happened during that time when Jesus was hanging on the cross.

Suppose now that my other hand represents Jesus. Again, the ceiling represents God. Now there was no 'book' between Jesus and God. He always perfectly obeyed the will of God. He always pleased His Father. Now while Jesus was on the cross, God took the sins of people in every age and placed them on Jesus. Then an amazing thing happened. Remember, God must punish all evil. Well, at this moment, God poured upon His own Son on the cross all the wrath and anger and punishment that should fall on you and me. You could say God executed His own Son! Jesus died of the punishment of God. To show that he had completely dealt with our sins and punishment, three days later God brought Him back to life!

Now we must ask how much sin remains between the person who believes in Jesus, and God? The answer is none. Through the death of Jesus we can be forgiven for our sin and start again a new life with God as his children. When a person believes in Jesus Christ, God counts him or her as absolutely sinless and perfect in His eyes - in fact, as perfect as Jesus Christ himself.

However that doesn't happen automatically - we have to receive it from God.

That was the whole purpose of Paul being in Athens and talking to the people so that he could introduce them to a God they didn't know and help them see how they might begin a friendship with God. That's why we are here as a church in Chineham. We'd like to help people to know God. In the new year we will be running an Alpha course to help people get to know God better. There are some fliers about it at the back - just take one.

Paul was saying it is not we who build a home for God and look after him - he's does that for us and more. He wants us as we live in this world he has made to know him and love him and at the end to join him in eternity.