

Easter 6
Acts 17:22-31
John 14:15-21

Reflection 1: Groping for God

‘...[God] allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live., so that they would **search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him** – though indeed he is not far from each one of us.’ (Acts 17:26b-27)

The Acts reading we heard is one of my favourite passages in the bible so I’m going to begin our first reflection in Athens, time travelling back to around 2,000 years ago to Mars Hill, also known as the Areopagus.



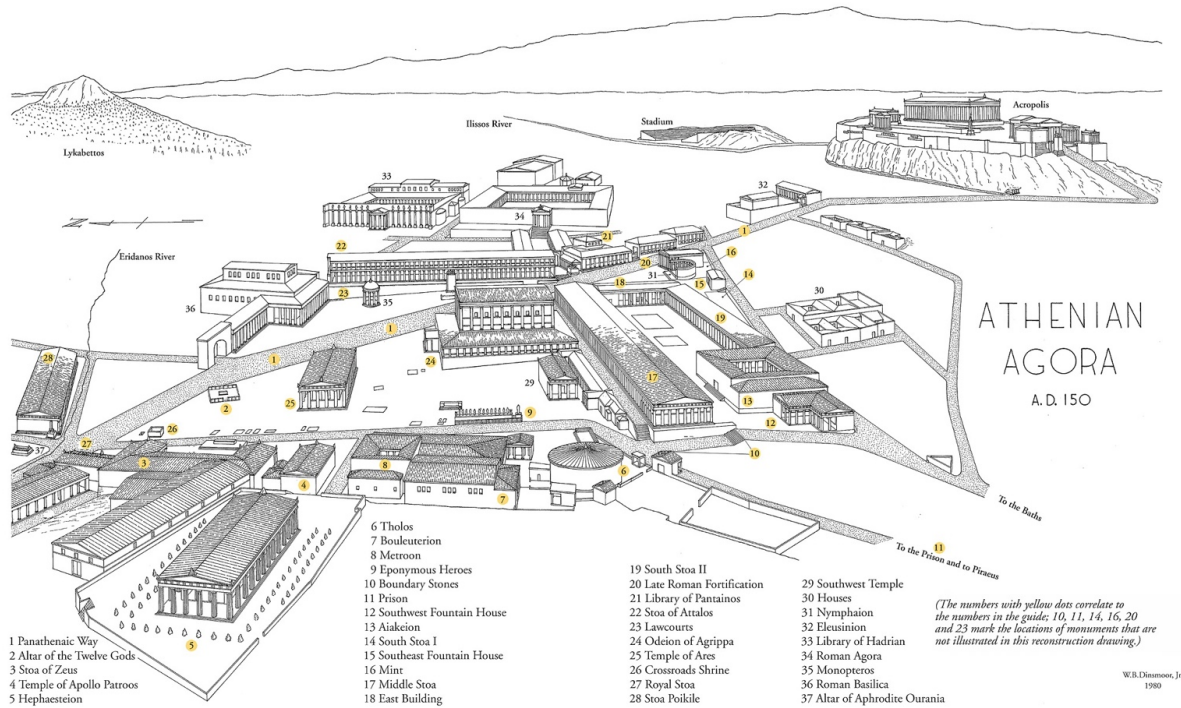
This large rock was where all the intellectuals of the day liked to gather to sit and listen to speakers discussing and introducing the latest philosophical ideas. It was like an ancient TED Talk forum. The Areopagus was situated overlooking the Agora, which was like the Oxford Street of Ancient Athens.



It was also packed with temples and shrines and altars to all sorts of gods and goddesses. And it was among these altars that St Paul walked past, while waiting for his friends Timothy and



Silas to join him. While St Paul did his sightseeing, mulling over the differences between his native home in Israel and the new sights and smells in this great ancient cultural capital on his missionary journey, he came upon an altar which astonished him.





altare al "dio ignoto"

— fine del II – inizi del I secolo a.C.

Travertino

Dal Palatino. Area sud-orientale, presso il Velabro

altar of the "unknown god"

— late 2nd – early 1st century BC

Travertine

From the Palatine. South-Eastern area, near the Velabrum

The Athenians were so religious and perhaps determined to avoid any kind of deity liability suit they even had an altar to ‘an Unknown God’ just to cover themselves in any eventuality. It is this altar that sews a seed in St Paul’s mind of how to talk to the Athenians about Jesus. Jesus was as yet *unknown* to them. They hadn’t yet heard about Jesus’s death and resurrection, about Jesus’s radical claim to be God himself, come down to humanity, to live and die so that humans could live with God even though they die.

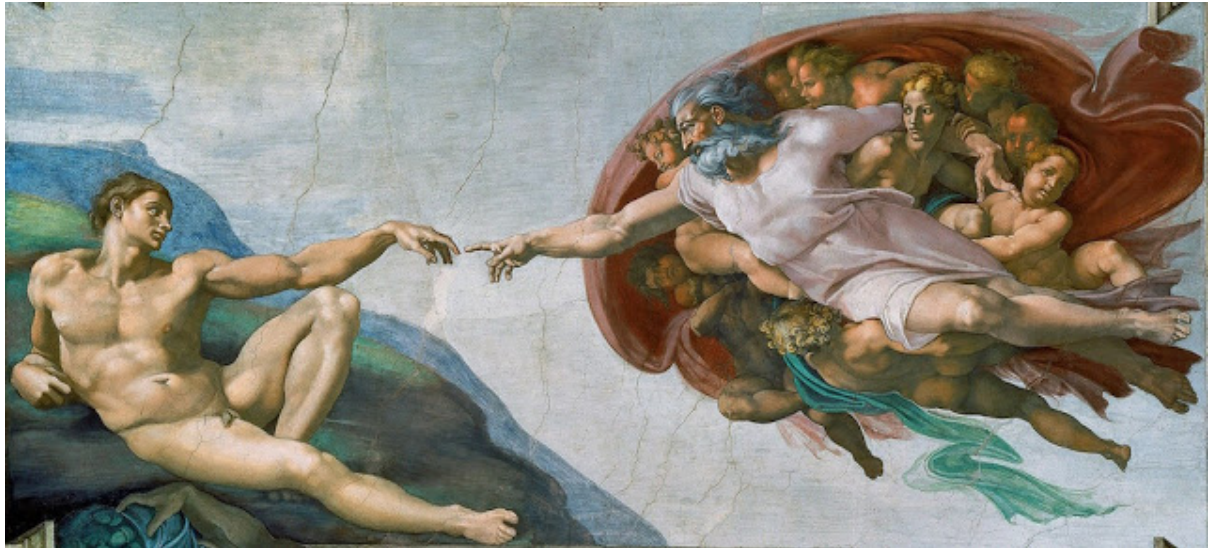
I love this passage of scripture because it challenges us to think creatively about how we can introduce our family, friends, neighbours and colleagues who do not yet *know* Jesus, to God who has revealed Himself to humanity in the fully human, fully divine body of Jesus. And this is something we will be encouraged to really pray and act on from Friday onwards as we step into the waiting between marking Jesus’s Ascension to the Father in Heaven on Thursday, and celebrating on Pentecost Sunday the coming of the promised Holy Spirit on 10 days later.

How can we tell those we love about the God we *know* and love, who is as yet *unknown* to them? How can we show the love of Jesus, that we have received, with those who as yet do not *know* Jesus?



7

St Paul’s way of talking to the Athenians about the God who was as yet *Unknown* to them, was by focusing on their humanity and the contrast between the shrines and altars which had been constructed by hand, and the God of the universe who isn’t chiselled out of stone, or shaped out of molten gold or silver and set on a plinth. St Paul introduces the *Unknown* God to them as the one who in fact should be *known* by humanity because he gives life and breath to all things.



8

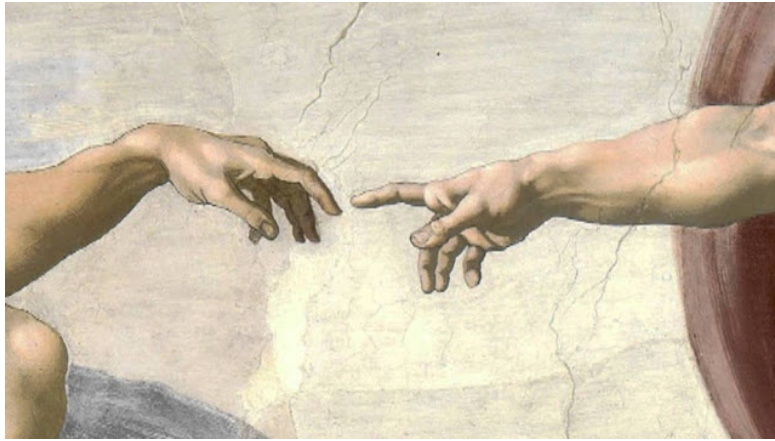
St Paul goes back to the creation account in Genesis and asserts that God didn't just make the world and then leave it to its own devices. God carefully ordered the exact times and places of all human kind, in *order* that humanity would search for God.



9

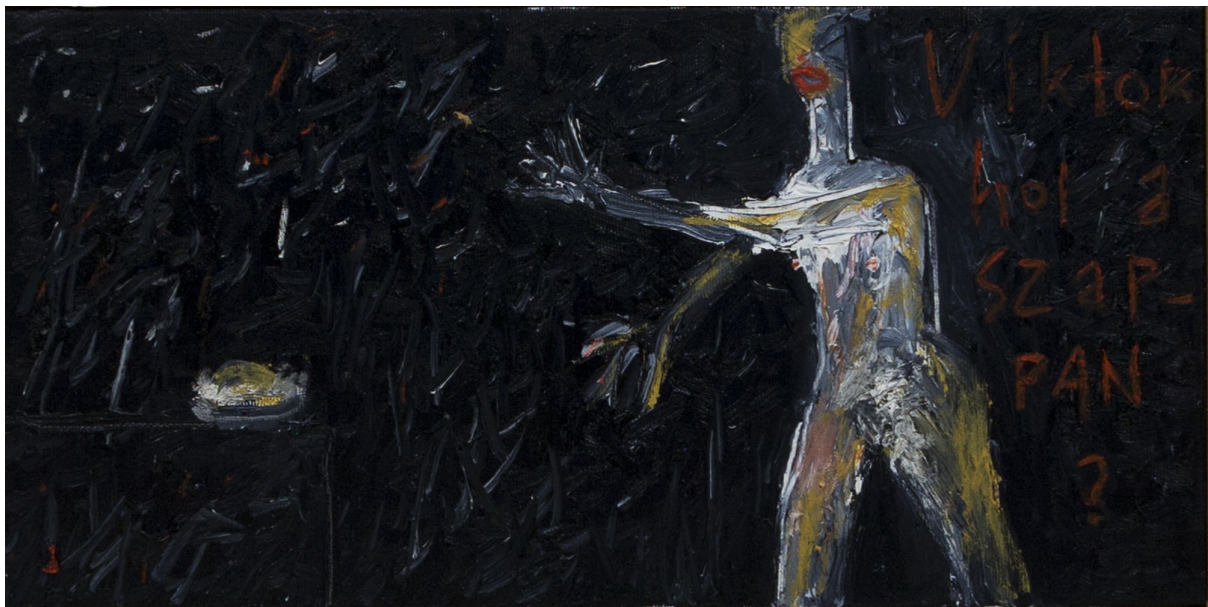
The problem with sin is that even though God is not far from any human being. It often blinds us to God's presence.

Even though we are but a whisper away from God, the distance can feel set in stone.



10

Perhaps during this season of lockdown, when we cannot reach out and touch those we love, we can more easily relate to the feeling of groping in the dark, desperately wishing that our outstretched hand would be met by another's outstretched hand.



11

St Paul ends his TED talk to the Athenians on a note of extraordinary hope. Sin blinded humanity to the knowableness and nearness of God, so God entered our darkness as Jesus, to reveal God and bring light to our darkness. As Jesus, God became tactile and illuminated humanity to return to the God, they had forgotten, abandoned or hadn't been able to see clearly. In his flesh, Jesus brought an end to that alienation of darkness from God, brought about by our sin, by nailing sin to the cross, and by defeating death, proving his divinity by rising to life.



12

I'll finish with the words of Pope Benedict XVI: 'God does not leave us groping in the dark. He has shown himself to us as a man. In his greatness, he has let himself become small.' Amen.

"He who has seen me
has seen the Father..."

John 14:9

GOD DOES NOT
LEAVE US
GROPING
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HE HAS
SHOWN HIMSELF
TO US
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IN HIS
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HE HAS
LET HIMSELF
BECOME
SMALL.

Pope
Benedict XVI



AnastPaul 19

Reflection 2: Letting Go

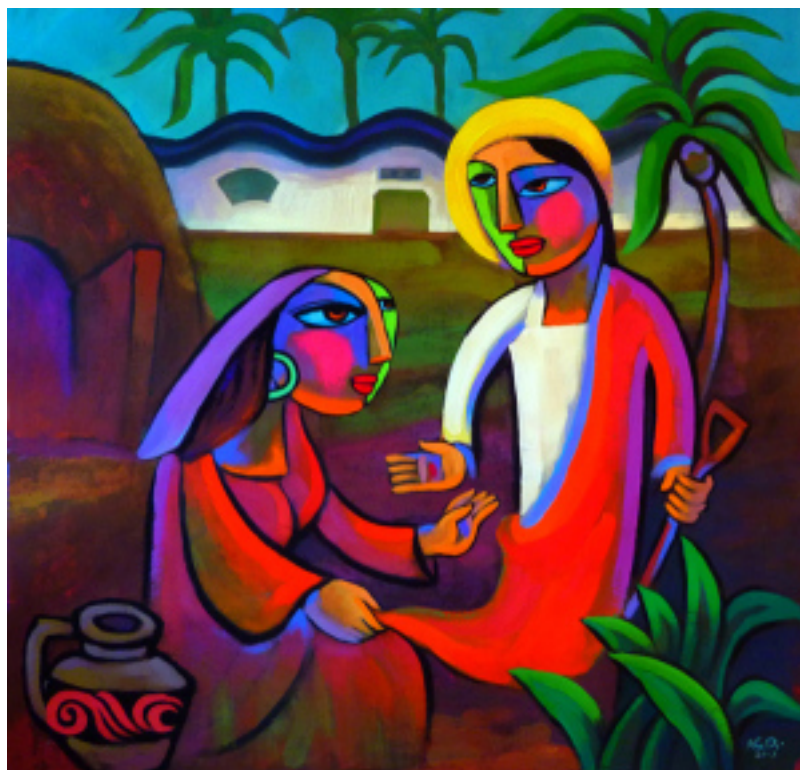
Last Sunday as I mulled over Julie's brilliant reflections and her observation on the nature of an embrace I was reminded of Mary Magdalene's encounter with the resurrected Jesus, recorded a few chapters on from our gospel reading we heard today.

'Do not hold onto me because I have not yet ascended to my Father' (John 20:17)

To envelope in a bear hug strikes me as the most natural thing to do when confronted with a loved one, particularly one from whom you have been separated for some time, and especially one you thought to be lost from you forever.



So I can completely relate to Mary Magdalene's desire to not want to let Jesus go from her embrace.



But as Julie so astutely pointed out last Sunday, an embrace is only an embrace when you let go.



I imagine Mary's pain as Jesus tells her to let go. *But I've just found you – you're alive!* You really are God! And now you are telling me to leave you, to go and tell others about you, about the truth of who you are. The known God, the tactile God, The Light, who illuminated

our darkness so that we could see you, see that you were there all along and always have been.



But I don't want to let you go. I can hear Jesus's gentleness, perhaps trying to remind her of the words he spoke in our gospel reading today: 'I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.' (John 14:18-19). *You need to let me go.* Because when you do, my Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, will come to live with you, so that you will never ever be on your own.

In times past, humanity reached out **groping for God**, hoping to find this *Unknown* God. Yet the promise followers of Jesus have, is that God isn't *just* near to us. By the Holy Spirit, he *is known by us*, even when the rest of life and lockdown is very *unknown*. By the Holy Spirit we can experience an intimacy and security far greater than a physical embrace. The intimacy of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, living within us; the Son illuminating our inner darkness, the Holy Spirit comforting our inner pain and the Father filling us with his love to flow out of us towards others. The Known God, is our certainty, hope and anchor in the midst of our unknowns.

Can I invite you to form a fist with your hand? Look at your closed fist. It is impossible to place anything in your palm with your fingers furled over and held tight. Perhaps you might like to use this as a metaphor or as a visual aid in prayer this week of the things that you are finding hard to let go of, especially during this time of lockdown when so much has been taking from us, including loved ones.

Now can I invite you to unfurl your fingers and look at your outstretched palm and hand? Note the free space and possibility. This free space might flood with grief. Possibility might seem overwhelming. Can I invite you this week as you pray, first with a tight fist, and then with palm open, allowing yourself to grieve but also to hope, for the possibilities that this season of barrenness, of separation might bring, as we too long for when Jesus will return again, and we will see him face to face, and I hope be physically enfolded in a bear hug. Amen.

¹ Areopagus (Mars Hills) by Broke Tourist, accessed 14th May 2020, <https://www.broketourist.net/areopagus-mars-hills/>

² Perry Tinklenberg, accessed 14th May 2020, <https://itemridealong.home.blog/2019/03/29/paul-at-the-areopagus-acts-1722ff/>

³ Wikimedia Foundation, Accessed 14th May 2020, <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/346988346264255838/>.

⁴ **Agora Image: 2008.20.0096:** The Athenian Agora in A.D. 150, accessed 14th May 2020, <http://agora.ascsa.net/id/agora/image/2008.20.0096&q=&t=&v=list&p=1&s=1&sort=&size=full>

⁵ <http://www.freebibleimages.org/illustrations/athens/> accessed: 14th May 2020.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Paul's Sermon on Mars Hill, by Seth Michael, screenshot, accessed: 14th May 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=665kzWZfcOU>.

⁸ God reaches out to Adam, Michelangelo, Cistern chapel. Accessed 14th May 2020, <http://stephaniehatch.blogspot.com/2017/02/god-reaches-out-to-adam-to-us.html>.

⁹ Accessed 14th May 2020, <https://trinitymilford.wordpress.com/2011/05/31/groping-for-god/>.

¹⁰ God reaches out to Adam, Michelangelo, Cistern chapel. Accessed 14th May 2020, <http://stephaniehatch.blogspot.com/2017/02/god-reaches-out-to-adam-to-us.html>.

¹¹ **WOMAN GROPING IN THE DARK** by FRANYO AATOTH
2014

20x40 cm

oil on canvas

In the Várfok Gallery, screenshot, accessed: 14th May 2020, <https://www.varfok-galeria.hu/mutargyak/aatoth-franyo-en/woman-groping-in-the-dark/?lang=en>.

¹² 640x481 Online Shop Artist Hand Painted Creation Of Adam! Hand Of God - The Finger Of God Painting. Screenshot, Accessed 14th May 2020, <https://paintingvalley.com/the-finger-of-god-painting#the-finger-of-god-painting-20.jpg>.

¹³ Accessed 14th May 2020, <https://anastpaul.com/2020/05/09/quote-s-of-the-day-9-may-god-does-not-leave-us-groping-in-the-dark/>

¹⁴ "The Resurrection," an illumination of John 20 by Donald Jackson from The Saint John's Bible. All images courtesy of Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota. Copyright 2002.

Accessed 14th May 2020, <https://faithandleadership.com/gretchen-e-ziegenhals-mary-magdalenes-perspective-reflecting-resurrectio>.

¹⁵ *He Qi (Chinese, 1950–), Do Not Hold On to Me, 2013. Oil on canvas*, accessed 21 May 2020, <https://artandtheology.org/2016/04/05/she-mistook-him-for-the-gardener/>.

¹⁶ Accessed 16th May, 2020, <https://capcoakland.me/2018/03/30/blogging-towards-easter-sunday-april-1-2018/>.