

The tomb of the Unknown Soldier and the Altar of the Unknown God

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Easter 6 A – Acts 17 22-31, Ps 66 7-19, Ist Pt 3 8-22, Jn 14 15-21

The story of the altar to the unknown God reminds me of the first thing you see when you go into Westminster Abbey. It's one of the most striking of the 170 odd monuments that you can see there; the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

It's just inside the west door, right in the middle, and surrounded by a tiny hedge of brilliant red poppies. The poppies set it apart, and so does the inscription – not just what it says, but also its brand new appearance. The lettering on this monument is as crisp as it was on the day it was unveiled – Armistice Day 1920. Many other tombs set in the floor of the abbey are barely legible; worn out by the feet of millions of pilgrims. But no-one walks on this one; 'it's so sacred', somebody there told me, 'that even Princess Diana's funeral procession had to detour around it.'

I'm reminded of this today by Paul talking to the philosophers about an altar he'd discovered in Athens; an altar dedicated to 'the unknown God'. There's something especially sacred in this blending of the unknown with the ordinary, and it's there in both the tomb of the Unknown Soldier and the altar to the unknown God. The Unknown Soldier represents an ordinary person – it could be you or me. The unknown God could be our God; somehow bound to us by the same sense of mixed familiarity and mystery. No arcane knowledge or ritual stands between us and the possibility that this God might just be our God – yours and mine.

The Unknown Soldier and the unknown God could be nothing to us, yet somehow they represent what is common to all of us. Somehow they are present to us, and apparently they are to everyone else too. In today's gospel, Jesus touches on this commonality between us. He's just told his friends that he's going away. But two things will protect us from losing our connection with him; first, keeping his commandments – particularly the new commandment he had just given to love each other as he loves us – and second, the gift of the Holy Spirit. These two things will work together to see us embody and honour Jesus who will soon be invisible to us.

Our two monuments to Jesus are our love and our unity; they are sacred. The altar to the unknown God, and the tomb of the Unknown Soldier – express these sacred gifts in a similar way. They each speak of those who've been like Jesus for us; blessing and defending us even before we knew of them. They also say there's something sacred about each of us; they assert our commonality through the mystery of our connection to a God and a person who are both unknown to us.

Undeserved grace is the name of this connection; the soldier, the unknown God, Jesus – they've taken us on trust; they've given us the benediction of their trust, and by doing that, they've somehow declared us to be their family, and they've called us to be that family for each other. Grace believes in us; grace takes us on trust.

Christians proclaim this grace to be perfectly expressed in Jesus. His acceptance and support were available to us before we'd ever been, and he still offers us free acceptance no matter how – or how often – we let his trust down. When someone trusts you to be a better person than you think you really are, it's lovely! When you know there's someone who always thinks the best of you, it makes you do just that little bit better. You want to vindicate their trust; make them glad they trusted you. Grace is something we experience as healing. It's much more than physical healing. Something

much deeper than what we ask is given to us. Grace can make us whole.

What do the unknown God and the Unknown Soldier have to do with all this? They're unknown to us, but we know deep down that they've done something for us all the same. They're a secret friend to us, and to everyone around us. These unknowns are pictures – symbols of a secret friend whose identity we discover through countless little meetings and experiences; a secret friend who, we ultimately discover, is with us – who is in us – just as Jesus said he would be.

Jn 14.¹⁸ “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹ In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” Amen