

Acts 17:16-31

Paul, former persecutor, but now foremost missionary of the early Christian movement, is travelling around the Roman Empire, proclaiming the message of Jesus crucified and risen, and now he comes to Athens, ancient seat of civilisation and learning. What follows, you might say, is a classic example of missionary engagement.

On arrival in Athens Paul does what he always does: he seeks out the local Jewish community. They are always the first port of call, for the message Paul is delivering is a development of the Jewish faith – Paul would say it is the fulfilment of the Jewish faith – and so he heads first to the synagogue. But Paul will not be confined to the synagogue and from there he takes the message out to the market place where he meets some of the intellectuals of the city: Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, devotees of two great philosophical schools of the day. They are pretty dismissive of Paul: they call him a babbler. They after all, are clever, educated people and not disposed to some Jewish upstart with a headful of new ideas, certainly not when he's blethering on about the resurrection of some executed rebel.

Some Athenians, however, like the sound of something new. Some Athenians, like many today, have itchy ears and can always be persuaded by something novel, no matter how far-fetched, and so Paul finds himself on the Areopagus, a prominent rock on the Acropolis where the intellectuals of the day spent their time in philosophical discussion. And there Paul preaches the Gospel – adapted, we might say, to this Athenian context. And of course our question is what Paul might have to say to us today, were he to be standing not on the Areopagus but in Dam Square or in the centre of any other modern city? What are we to make of Paul's message here and now?

Well, I want to start with the first verse of our passage which says that Paul was 'deeply distressed' to see that the city was full of idols. Clearly there were all sorts of what Paul describes further on as 'objects of worship', representations of God in gold and silver and stone and in images. And for a Jew like Paul idolatry was always offensive, hence God's sacred command to his people: 'you shall not make for yourself an idol... you shall not bow down to them or worship them.' And so Paul is deeply distressed. He notes how these people are 'extremely religious in every way': signs of religion are everywhere, but people are confused and scattered in their beliefs.

And how does that compare with Amsterdam, or Edinburgh or London? Well, he could hardly say that we are 'extremely religious', not any more. We've largely given up on religion, but we are – have you not heard? – 'spiritual'. Yes, a diet of pure materialism and consumerism doesn't greatly appeal and so we are open to – well, 'the spiritual', whatever that may mean. And we can well understand why many have had enough of religion but the problem with 'spirituality' is that it can be a cover for confusion, of a need to keep matters of the soul as vague and loose and ambiguous as possible. And one problem with the demise of religion is that when it goes so too does any sense of shared truth, of traditions and narratives that unite us and hold us together and give shape to our common life. Truth becomes a matter of subjective, private choice – my truth is what works for me - and while diversity in all things is wonderful and to be cherished, the danger is that we become much like the Athenians – scattered and confused.

Paul, then, is deeply distressed by what he finds in Athens. Yet I want us to note his approach, his strategy, in his address on the Areopagus. And let me preface this by saying that what Paul is doing here is a kind of street preaching. He stands in a public place before a crowd of strangers, people who do not share his beliefs, and he addresses them. Now, in my time, I've encountered a fair amount of street preaching one way or another, in fact I've done it. And one thing I notice, sadly, is that it tends often to be pretty heavy on judgement and wrath. Often it is a message of repentance: you're all sinners and you need to repent! I've heard that on occasion near Central Station and it's usually someone denouncing sin of one kind or another. Now, that is not Paul's message here. In fact he doesn't just offload his message about God and Jesus and his resurrection and he doesn't get round to mentioning repentance at all until near the end of his

speech, and we'll return to that later. What Paul does in fact is to engage positively with the Athenians, establishing points of agreement, making contact with their beliefs.

So he points out that the Athenians have an altar to 'an unknown God.' Maybe the Athenians were worried that in all the confusion and profusion of gods and altars and images and shrines they had missed one out, and in case that god might be offended at being ignored and vent his wrath they put up this anonymous altar, just to cover all the bases. Well, it seems strange and unbelievable to us as, no doubt, it did to Paul, but he uses this as a means of engaging with the Athenians: 'this unknown God of your I proclaim to you' – and off he goes. So Paul does not just denounce the Athenians and their beliefs, he engages constructively with them. Indeed later on he quotes with approval their own pagan philosophers and poets. He is showing that even their own culture acknowledges that there is a God and we are his offspring – and yes, he then goes on very cleverly to give that a Christian spin, using it to expound the gospel, but he recognises truth wherever it is to be glimpsed - even in the philosophies of Athenians who know nothing of the God of Israel or of Jesus Christ.

Well, what a lesson there is for us here! All truth is God's truth, wherever it is to be found – even where Christ is not named. Yes, of course, as Christians we believe that ultimate truth is embodied in Jesus Christ, but that truth cannot be confined to the church or even to the religion that bears Christ's name. And we should be generous therefore in our approach to others who are fellow seekers after truth, looking for insights wherever we can find them among those of other faiths or none or among those moderns who are on a quest for 'spirituality'. And wherever we encounter truth the light of Christ will illumine it in a distinct way and will enable us to discern it more deeply – exactly as Paul does here - and we will glimpse the wonder of how all things hold together and are woven together in Christ. So may God grant us the humility to recognise truth wherever it is to be found, and may God give us sensitivity to the Holy Spirit who leads us into truth, and may God fire us with the imagination to see how all truth is gathered up in Christ.

Having said that, however, and moving on to the last part of Paul's speech, we see that Paul is uncompromising about the Christian Gospel. Having acknowledged the truth in the philosophies of the Greeks he now speaks of Jesus and I want to particularly pick up on one key verse. It's towards the end of Paul's speech where he says that 'God commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance by raising him from the dead.' Now this is Paul full on, unrestrained, firing on all Christian cylinders. And maybe we don't care much for this talk of judgment and repentance but we need to stay with this and unpick it, because what he saying is crucial.

For a start, Paul is talking here of a God who is committed to putting things right. God looks at a world that is spoiled and he is resolved to restore it and redeem it. And he has acted decisively in Christ to do this, engaging on the cross with the power of death that defaces his good creation. And the resurrection of Jesus declares that he has done this, that death is a defeated foe whose days are numbered. And from there Paul looks forward to the day of judgement - and this is the day when finally all will be finally put right and all will be well. Judgment, you see, is not about punishment and retribution – it's about the restoration of all things in a new creation, a new heaven and earth. Then all evil will be revealed and things kept secret will be brought into the light and exposed and banished for ever. This is good news. All creation cries out for this. This is the final act of God's grand drama, the last chapter of God's great story, and without it there can be no justice and no closure to the pain of the world. But we anticipate all this here and now by repentance – by aligning our lives here and now with the glory that shall be. Repentance is putting into practice now, bringing into the present here and now, what awaits us on the horizon of history. It's gospel, good news!

You see the problem with religion – and the Athenians were extremely religious – is that all too often it is a bastion of the status quo. Too often religion is reactionary and baptises things as they are. Empires and rulers use religion to affirm their power and authority. And Paul ridicules images of gold or silver or stone precisely because they are inert and passive and they change

nothing. God, however, is not like that. God shakes the foundations of the old order and calls into being a new world. And repentance, therefore, is a great act of defiance, subversive and liberating. It's an invitation to join now in the transformation that is coming. And Paul will not remain silent when he has been entrusted with such good news.

So yes, Paul is distressed at the chaos and confusion that he sees in Athens with all its religiosity and idolatry. But he recognises wherever truth is present there, struggling to get out, and he affirms it, and engages with it. But that is the prelude to his uncompromising proclamation of the hope that has been revealed to him in Christ. May give us grace to live by Paul's example in these troubled times. Amen.