

St Brandon's 17 May 2020

**Acts 17: 22-31;
John 14:15-21**

Let's pray.

Gracious God, please speak to us now through your word, open our ears to hear you, our eyes to see you and our hearts to respond to in love and service. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Good morning. I want to begin with a word of thanks to the Amy, Phoebe, Sam and Richard for the beautiful anthem we have just enjoyed. I hope you were able to allow those words of Jesus to connect with you at a deep level- the promise which Jesus gave his first disciples and gives us, that he will send them the Comforter, the Advocate, the Holy Spirit. These are the same words which James has just read, from John's gospel.

Jesus' words paint for us a vivid picture of the life of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, into which we are drawn through faith in Jesus and through his gift to us of the Holy Spirit. As we reach Ascension Day this week, and ten days later Pentecost, we will be considering these things.

But I want to focus this morning on our first reading, from Acts, and to take you with me, virtually of course, to Ancient Greece and her beautiful capital, Athens.

If you were here last week, you may wonder why we have jumped forward 10 chapters...

Last Sunday in Chapter 7, Paul, then Saul, featured as a shady figure in the story of Stephen's death, and Geoff showed us the powerful Rembrandt painting of the scene, with Saul sitting holding the coats of those who were stoning him.

In the intervening chapters, Saul meets the Risen Jesus for himself in a dramatic conversion which begins on the road to Damascus. He becomes Paul the apostle of Christ and eventually sets out to share the good news of Jesus with the dispersed Jewish communities around the Mediterranean and across the Roman empire.

We know this because the New Testament gives us fantastic evidence and insights into how it happened- firstly through the book of the Acts of the Apostles, or Acts for short, which is Luke's Gospel Part 2 with lots of adventure and geography – if you went to Sunday School you will almost certainly have made or seen maps of where Paul's journeys, complete with storms, shipwrecks, prison, escapes and earthquakes. Paul could give Indiana Jones a run for his money!

Secondly, we know much about this period, the early years of the Christian church, because Paul planted Christian communities as he went, prayed for them, sent them trusted helpers, stayed in touch and wrote them letters, 13 of which survived and now comprise the bulk of the epistles in the New Testament.

Come to think of it, that model of caring for dispersed churches is pretty relevant at the moment..

The combination of Luke's great journalism in Acts- he was even there for part of it, and Paul's correspondence, means that we know a great deal about the first twenty or thirty years after Jesus' death and resurrection, and how the gospel spread.

It's good to remember this in a culture which increasingly views Christianity

as a religion based on wishful thinking or emotion, rather than deep conviction of truth, and weighty historical evidence.

Lets look now at how Paul got to Athens... and don't worry I'm not going to rehearse all 10 chapters between last week and this week.

But, in Chapter 16, just before today's passage, we read that the Spirit of Jesus guides Paul very clearly about where *not* to go, and that he then has a dream in which a man from Macedonia (northern Greece) says 'Come and help us'. That's why he goes to Greece.

Now if we cross-check this with what we know about Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit first came on Jesus' followers, we find something interesting. Acts Chapter 2 tells us that 3000 of the Jews who were in Jerusalem for the feast, not only heard Peter's sermon in their own language, but heard God speaking to them and responded; they became Christians, received the Holy Spirit and went back home from Jerusalem taking the good news with them.. Luke also tells us in Acts 2 where they came from- a long list of Biblical place names which are quite a mouthful! Now, if we plot those places on a map, we see that none of the 3000 converts came from mainland Greece, but from Italy, Crete and many places across Asia Minor. We could conclude then, that the Holy Spirit is directing Paul to places where the gospel has not yet been preached, where the need is greatest....

Paul travels to Northern Greece, spends at least 3 weeks in Thessalonica preaching in the synagogue every Sabbath and finding a real openness to the gospel. But there is also, of course, opposition and eventually, having fled south, Paul comes to Athens, leaving his companions Silas and Timothy to

catch him up. Let's read back a few verses from today's passage...Chapter 17
v.16

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the market-place every day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, 'What does this babbler want to say?' Others said, 'He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.' (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) ¹⁹ So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?' ²⁰ It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.' ²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

Paul is an astute observer of real life. He's spent a few days walking the streets of Athens, and making waves along the way, of course. He's been to the synagogue, which is always his starting point, but he's also been in the market place. He's debated with Greek philosophers from the two predominant schools of thought at the time- the Epicureans and the Stoics. Epicureans believed that life was for pleasure, the gods were distant and didn't really want anything to do with humans, leading to a kind of 'keep your head down, live and let live' philosophy, not dissimilar to how many people live today and fine unless you are in need of help or support from others, and as long as you keep the big, life and death questions at bay.

An Epicurean would find the Covid 19 crisis easy if they were safe and well, but deeply disturbing if they were called on to care for others or seek others' help.

By contrast Stoicism, the other prevailing philosophy, taught that living a good and moral life was important because then you were safe if and when the gods turned angry.

And that's if the gods were there, for agnosticism was rife, and there was little certainty about anything, in the proliferation of gods and goddesses whose idols were to be seen on every street corner. These included the one Paul has spotted, dedicated to the Unknown God... Luke tells us that Paul was deeply distressed by all these idols and no doubt he prayed as he walked, longing to be able to bring hope and light into the confusion of ideas, the fear of foreigners, the obsession with novelty... does that sound at all familiar to us?

So, a few days in to his stay in Athens, Paul is not exactly arrested but is 'invited' to attend the Areopagus, which is where we find him as today's reading begins.

The Areopagus- we all know where that is, don't we?

Clearly when Luke wrote, he thought his readers would, because the Areopagus was one of the most famous places in Athens. It's name means Hill of Ares or Mars, and on it was built the court house which dealt with the most serious crimes, social and spiritual. The hill overlooks the marketplace and looks up to the Acropolis with its temples and most strikingly the Parthenon, temple to the goddess Athena, patron of the city.

Where the Acropolis was a focus for worship of the gods, the Areopagus was all about reason and order.

Having rapidly gained a reputation as an outspoken foreigner, Paul now has the chance to give an account of himself- both a threatening situation, and an incredible opportunity!

It's likely, by the way, that the Athenians thought Paul was preaching about two new gods- Jesus, whose name sounds like Healing, and Anastasis, the Greek word for resurrection, who could have been a female goddess alongside him.

Interesting that they have heard this, the core message- because we know that Christian faith really is all about Jesus and the Resurrection! Important to note too that in Greek philosophy there was absolutely no belief in life after death...

Paul only visits Athens once, as far as we know, and only has one chance to speak. Luke gives us a short and punchy summary of what Paul says, in this highly charged situation and much had been written about the structure of his argument, but that's for another day.

I want to draw out three threads from it, and show how crucial these are today as well.

Firstly, Paul starts where the Athenians are, and not aggressively, but building a link.

Are we defensive with those who don't share our faith, or do we recognise people's seeking and enquiry, which are pointers to a hunger to know God, find a purpose in life. By alluding to the statue to the Unknown God, Paul

stands with them, not over them, as he speaks about the God whom he knows and worships.

Where the Greeks worship gods who are unknown, Paul speaks of the God who can be known through Jesus Christ, the God who came to earth in human form not to test us but to save us.

Looking up at the Parthenon, no doubt, he tells them that his God doesn't live in a manmade shrine, doesn't need to be appeased with sacrifices, but is the Creator and source of all life.

And human beings, says Paul, having created by this one life-giving God in his image, have within them the desire to search for God, 'perhaps grope for him and find him' - I wonder if Paul is thinking of his own blindness when he was stopped by God on the Damascus road and had to grope in the dark, literally, until God rescued him both physically and spiritually.

Paul's God is not for ever Unknown, but can be Known, is not found in created idols but is the Creator of all, and is not at a distance, but near to us all- here Paul quotes a well-known Greek poet to connect once more with his audience.

And finally Paul issues a challenge- the same challenge he faced when he was convinced that this new religion was misguided and downright dangerous.

It's the challenge to accept what they are hearing and to repent- turn around, because God will judge them and all the world.

Here, in the pace of judgement and decision, the high court of Athens, Paul talks about God as the Judge of all at the end of time and about the one chosen to judge, Jesus who has risen from death.

We might read those words as a sort of credal statement, familiar territory in church services, but just think of the impact of Paul's words then!

We don't know much about what happened or how much longer Paul stayed in Athens. We have no letters from Paul to the Athenians, though there may have been some which were lost.

What we do read, at the end of Chapter 17 and immediately after today's passage is this:

³² When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, "We will hear you again about this." ³³ At that point Paul left them.

³⁴ But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite (part of the court) and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

So it seems that Paul has done what the Holy Spirit called him to do. He has shared his faith not just in the 'religious' places but in the market place, not just on the Sabbath by every day.

He's not shirked opportunities but has built links with people and earned the right to speak.

Now we are not all called to do preach like Paul, but we are all called to live guided by the Holy Spirit, to care and pray for those who do not know the living God who is near to all, and even, perhaps to talk about him, as we have opportunity to do so.

May God's word bring us both encouragement and challenge, whatever the Holy Spirit guides us this week.

Amen.