

Acts 17.22-31
17th May 2020

Making Connections

In today's reading from Acts, read to us a moment ago by Christine, we encounter a skilful preacher very much in touch with his audience; Paul's sermon near the Acropolis in Athens, as he stood before the Areopagus Council is a Masterclass in culturally relevant preaching.

Which is odd in a way, because sermons were the last thing on his mind when he arrived in this city, the intellectual capital of the Greek speaking world. He'd come to Athens to escape opposition. It had been a tough ride in Thessalonica, so Athens was meant to be 'down' time as he waited for his colleagues Silas and Timothy to arrive.

But this city got under Paul's skin! Here people loved asking questions and debating ideas. .

Fascinating that! We think of Roman and Greek culture in terms of antiquity and quote it as ancient wisdom. Yet Paul's audience loved 'new' ideas – it didn't mean they accepted them, in fact they loved nothing better than challenging novel concepts. For them Mars Hill was a sort of Speaker's Corner on the edge of Hyde Park – a real marketplace of ideas and a forum of debate.

Of course, Paul couldn't resist joining in and his sermon in Acts 17 is the result.

Actually what we have here is a sermon as remembered by Luke, the writer of Acts, and that's not quite the same thing - for no doubt the original was much, much longer. These ten verses just gives us a flavour of Paul's address, the bits that Luke thought were important.

I'm always intrigued in church if I notice people taking notes whilst I'm preaching. I've never been brave enough, but I'd love to go up to them afterwards and see what they wrote down. I'd probably be a bit surprised and comment: Did I really say that? Because its often the case that what you think you said, and what people actually hear you say are not necessarily the same thing!

Anyway, Paul the preacher starts where they are, respecting and appreciating their spiritual journey. So, the opening line of his sermon that day was full of compliments: *People of Athens, he says, I see that in everything that concerns religion you are uncommonly scrupulous...*

I think Paul is glad to be among fellow seekers after truth.

This week a friend sent me an invitation to join a Webinar in which various faith leaders will be speaking of how they look at Coronavirus through the prism of their various traditions. Lucy Winckett, the rector of St James', Piccadilly will be taking part alongside Rabbi Charlie, the leader of our local South Bucks Progressive Jewish community and other faith leaders. A forum bringing together, in a spirit of mutual respect, some of today's Seekers after Truth.

Interesting how Paul gauges his context as he looks up and sees the Acropolis just a stone's throw away – and casually tells a

story about his day. He's been wandering about the place and has come up against one of these altars, fairly common in the Roman world, with the inscription: To an Unknown God.

So, now taking on board that probably the majority in his audience do believe in some sort of God he tries to make some connections. I think that's often our task as preachers, to work hard at trying to make connections.

He preaches, rather like Stephen did in last week's reading, about a God who doesn't live in a building or need a graven image.

He preaches about a God who, he believes, is the giver of life and breath.

He preaches about a God who can, in some ways, be found and understood.

And in doing this he significantly backs up his presentation not with a Jesus' quote but words from their own tradition, he speaks of the God in 'whom we live and move and have our being' – and those are the words of a 6th century BC Greek Philosopher called Epimenides – who was originally talking about Zeus.

In all of this Paul is making connections and giving names to ideas. And that sort of invitation to the Christian journey of faith probably resonates with many of us. It can feel like a 'homecoming' – to encounter a Christian teaching or idea and identify it as probably something we've always felt drawn to or believed in, but now the minister, Junior Church leader, fellow house group member or author of your current book has

suggested a name for that idea – or belief and a connection has been made that helps us as we put together this jigsaw of faith.

So, Paul starts from where they are and says he shares their seeking after truth – and that for him the journey has led him to Jesus Christ.

Maybe we are encouraged by all this and feel Paul is being generous and open-hearted in his preaching at Athens – until we come to the end of his sermon!

He wraps it all up by talking of judgement by the risen Christ.

At this point it all seems to get too severe and we might even think the apostle has ruined a perfectly good sermon with a rather bad ending.

I think, however, that Paul is being much more positive here than we might at first sight think.

For us the very word ‘judgement’ seems negative – part of the so called ‘Hell Fire and Brimstone’ sermons of Victorian evangelists. But I’m not sure that’s the way Paul means.

In a way he’s asking a question: How do we judge that God is present in anyone’s life? How do we discern the activity of God in our world?

I think Paul’s answer goes something like this: God’s presence among us is seen when the love and goodness of the risen Jesus, is experienced in my life, in the ministry of our church and out in the culture of our society.

Acts 17 goes some way in advocating that the only judgement that really counts is whether or not something of the love, compassion and goodness of God – as seen in the life of Jesus – is actually at work in us and our community today.

At the very least such an understanding encourages us to rejoice whenever we encounter the light of God in our world, wherever that sort of love is found and in whoever we experience that kind of goodness.

At Athens, as he debates with fellow seekers after truth, Paul shows us, I think, what it means to have at the same time a firm faith, a generous heart and a respectful spirit towards others. Because for him, in the final judgement, the issue is not who lives with the most orthodox theology but who loves with the goodness and kindness of God.

May it be so, in the name of the God who longs to reveal himself to us, and who shows us his wonderful character of love and service in the life of Jesus. Amen.