



Sermon: 21st May 2017

To the unknown God

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

Several years ago, we were on holiday in New York with friends. We decided to take a trip to the Statue of Liberty. Because this was after 9/11 security was really tight even for tourist attractions. It was like being at an airport; there were security guards all over the place with guns and we had to go through those scanners that they have at airports. We had to remove shoes, jewellery, jackets and belts. As our friend to go off his belt his wife commented in a loud voice, "his trousers will fall down!" We all found this quite funny but the security guards did not! Brandishing his gun in her direction one large and burly guard said, with quite a menacing tone in his voice, "listen up, ma'am, or you won't be going on this trip!" Perhaps our friend should have had braces as well as his belt! It might have saved us from a potential international incident!

The people of Athens were belts and braces kind of people. Not content with having altars to all of their gods and goddesses, of which there were a fair number, just in case they missed someone out there they had an altar to the unknown God. And what a gift this is to Paul! Here he comes with news of the death and resurrection of Jesus, the rebirth of Judaism, the birth of Christianity, looking for a way to tell people and he has this perfect opportunity. He is going to declare to them the unknown God. The first thing he says to them is that this God does not live in temples built by human hands. Athens was a wealthy city and its citizens lived in great luxury. Their temples were beautiful, great works of art, some of which of course are still standing. Yet, says Paul, God is not in the temple. And there is a sense in which still today we are building temples to house our gods. Society as a whole has become preoccupied with money, both for its own sake, but also to buy things. People buy lottery tickets, look for a pay rise, search out a bargain, all so that they can increase their income, have more money to buy a bigger house, better holidays, a more expensive car. There is an assumption that riches, wealth and possessions bring happiness. All around us we see the message that we need more, more, more. Our homes can become our temples, or our cars, or our golf club, or our foreign holidays, but God is not there, says Paul.

And today we have the same message that Paul took to the Athenians to take to our society, forget your idols, your aspirations to have more, better, bigger, God is not there. In an interview the author Jack Higgins was once asked what he wished he'd known before he became successful. His answer was, "when you get to the top of the greasy pole, there's nothing there!"

However, it's all very well to tell people, as Paul did, God is not there, but then what? Is there any point in telling them where God is to be found? Do they want to know? Obviously Paul thought there was a point. He assumed that his message was not going to fall on deaf ears, after all these were spiritual people otherwise they would not have so many altars. They are open, or they would not have had one to "the unknown god". He saw an opportunity and he grabbed it.

And still today people are spiritual. People are often uncomfortable with what they see as organised religion but it doesn't mean that they don't believe in God. Sadly, what it does mean is that they don't expect to find him in the church. So the message we can take from Paul today is that we don't need to give up on our friends and our neighbours, and our communities, because the search for more; more money, more possessions, is actually a search for God even although people often don't realise it.

And we also have a tendency to try and fill that God-shaped hole with other things. Becoming a Christian doesn't stop us wanting things. It doesn't stop us being tempted by the advertisements, by the chance of a quick buck. The lottery slogan, "it could be you!" is a very subtle, and very clever, temptation. And we can understand that people assume that the more they have the happier they will be. Sadly of course, the very opposite is true. Very often the more people have the more unhappy they are because they have more to worry about. Our job then, is to convince people that happiness doesn't lie in piling up possessions but rather lies in knowing God.

And we know that, do we not? People of faith, the surveys tell us time and time again, are the happiest people, and the longest lived. We may not always get it entirely right in terms of the balance between the material and the spiritual but because we acknowledge the spiritual and because we spend time in the presence of God and our fellow Christians, because we worship him, we do know the true value of things and we are happier than those who don't. But that is not the end of the story.

So, what next? We know that people have a spiritual need, we know that we have the answer to that spiritual need, how do we go about communicating with them especially if they don't want to hear. The next step is to tell them where God is to be found. That might seem a bit tricky, but Paul shows us how that is done too.

This is where Paul's sermon to the Athenians is so clever. He speaks their language. He takes the time to learn about their cultural assumptions and their icons. He delivers his sermon from a huge rock, almost a cliff top, called the Areopagus, it's that big rock in the foreground and you can see that it's right beside the temples. I've been there, I have stood on the Areopagus. It's much more dramatic than it looks in this photograph. From its highest point it falls away almost like a cliff and forms a natural stage from which someone could be seen for quite a distance and also heard. This was the debating centre of Athens, the place where the Athenians had the courts of the city and their philosophical debates. And in speaking to the Athenians he uses their language, not just Greek, but the philosophical language that they were accustomed to hearing in that place. And in speaking in that language he was able to speak directly to the audience showing how their icons actually pointed to God's kingdom already at work, and the risen Jesus Christ as King.

Paul puts his sermon into the language of the people. He finds a connecting point and uses it for his own purposes. He takes what is in front of him and makes it an illustration for his message. And that's really all we need to do! We don't need to preach the gospel in clever words. We don't need to be theologians. We don't need to embarrass ourselves and others by beginning discussions that make us feel uncomfortable. All we need to do is find the connecting points. Somebody once referred to it as, "Gossiping the gospel."

During this last week I was in conversation with some neighbours from around the corner. One of them in particular had recently lost a very good friend and will miss her very much. The other two were suggesting that they might bring her to the Rainbow Cafe once a month. And that was an opportunity. Simply to say, that's a really good idea, you'll get a good lunch, good company, home baking. To really encourage them to come, and although that's not church as we know it, in a sense, for them, it is the altar to the unknown God. It is a doorway, and entrance into the church, a possibility that a relationship might develop between them and us and that they might actually one day find a home here. The cafe is a place where we can reach out into our community but we can't if they don't come along. I don't get those sorts of opportunities very often. And it wasn't a big dramatic

opportunity, nobody was talking about faith. But I thought, nonetheless, that it was an opportunity. It was a connecting point. It was the church being able to fulfil a need. I can follow it up by dropping in to see this lady just before the next Rainbow Cafe and reminding her of this conversation. A baby step. Seems like nothing, but not difficult, not embarrassing, and who knows where it might lead?.

Just taking the opportunity when it arises to say, “come and see!” And that’s what Paul is talking about; taking the opportunity to speak to people in their language, about their concerns, but pointing them towards the church, towards God. And, as John reminds us, we have the spirit to help us. Jesus doesn’t expect us to do it on our own. So, I think the challenge of this passage for us today is to be on the lookout for those opportunities. And if we are not seeing any, then ask God to give them to us. Pray that he will steer conversations round to topics that will enable us to say, “come and see!” Casual conversations, everyday conversations, with the neighbour over the fence, with the checkout person in the Co-op, little conversations that give us the opportunity to ask that big question, come and see. That’s all, that’s all the early disciples did, that’s all Paul did, and that’s something we can do, “come and see”