

## So Close - Paul at the Areopagus

Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> May 2020

Readings: Psalm 66:8-20, John 14:15-21, Acts 17:22-3, 1 Peter 3:13-22

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Today's text from the Book of Acts is so oddly appropriate. We have the narrative of the apostle Paul in Athens, unusually all alone, unaccompanied by disciples or colleagues, surrounded by idols, faced with a serious challenge. Paul, a scholar, was born and raised initially in Tarsus. Tarsus was an ancient city dating back some 6,000 years. At that time, it was part of the Roman Empire and the capital of the province of Cilicia. Tarsus was infamous as the place of the first meeting between Mark Antony and Cleopatra. Whilst Tarsus was an important near port city of sorts, it was located on a hot, wet plain area plagued by mosquitoes much of the year. The apostle Paul was likely a victim of life-long malaria, his thorn in the flesh maybe, from a young age? Paul's father, of whom we know little was, it seems, a man of some note as he was both an important Jewish leader and a Roman citizen in Tarsus. A rarity but a sign of significant influence and wealth. The young Saul (named that until his encounter with Jesus) was taken to Jerusalem to be trained under Gamaliel, one of the foremost scholars of the time. By Paul's own account to the Sanhedrin in Philippians 3, Paul excelled above his colleagues and was extremely zealous for the Jewish faith. This we know, led to his persecution of the early Christian church. However, after Saul met Jesus on the Damascus Road, thereafter taking his Greek name Paul, (you can read about that encounter in Acts 9), his life changed dramatically. Paul, in Galatians 1:17, tells us that he went away to Arabia for a period of three years. This self-imposed exile gave him time to re-evaluate his life. His Jewish faith wasn't and hadn't been wrong, after all Jesus was a Jew himself, but rather mis-directed. How had he missed all the Scriptures that pointed so clearly to Yeshua the Messiah? How had he allowed tradition to blind him to what the Scriptures so clearly said, and that Jesus' life had so definitively proven? How had he come to a point of persecuting the Christians? And why had Jesus come to him, of all people, to give him such a new mission in life when he was so clearly unworthy? The period of isolation, reflection and study gave Paul the foundation, on top of what he already knew, to become, other than Jesus, the greatest evangelist of the Scriptures. God can take our greatest failings and make them into strengths He can use to His glory.

Now, in today's reading in Acts, we find Paul once again alone. This time he is faced with a different challenge, one unlike others that had faced him in life. Before him in Athens was not only the imposing edifice of the Areopagus itself, but also its scholars with the backing of hundreds of years of philosophical study, erudite reflection and skilled articulation. It was comparatively like a child becoming before a crowd of university professors in a University's most famous lecture theatre. To make things worse Paul's Greek was from distant Asia Minor, a rough dialect at best. If there was one thing that Paul was famous, or maybe infamous, it was his courage. It seemed that regardless of the challenge or threat, given an audience Paul would avail himself of the opportunity speak and share the Good news of Jesus Christ. Yet, and almost every time Paul spoke in public it led to riots, stonings, beatings or trials of various sorts. He seemed to have an uncanny knack of being able to seriously stir things up. But this was now a different audience, an audience of scholars. Men without any great knowledge of the Jewish faith and pre-cursors to an understanding of Jesus but keen and eager to know about new things. How could Paul address them, how could he hold their attention and get his vital message of salvation in Jesus across?

Paul began with one of the oldest salesman's tricks in the book, but a practical and wise one. He found a link with his audience, a common point of understanding, a connection from which he could segue into his main argument hopefully taking them with him. As Paul had walked through Athens he had seen statues and altars to a multitude of gods. From the time of the Emperor Augustus, some twenty years before Jesus, the Romans had brought the gods of various nations, in addition to the plethora of Greek and Roman gods, back to a Temple known as the Pantheon (a little sidenote here; the famous Pantheon we know now wasn't finished until 127AD by Emperor Hadrian the earlier one was still a meaningful structure but smaller). The Romans army understood that if they captured the gods, which were variously shaped stone and metal idols, and held them in Rome, the people of the gods would be subservient to the Roman empire which was stronger than their gods. Strange though it seems to modern ears, the strategy generally worked well. The superstitious Romans however didn't want to offend a god they had missed so, as Paul observed, they created an altar TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. The understanding was that the gods were to placated by offerings and various forms of worship. Keep the gods happy and the crops would get the weather patterns they needed, volcanoes wouldn't erupt, earthquakes wouldn't happen, and women would give birth naturally and so on. By worshipping and making offerings to an Unknown God the Greeks and Romans made sure they were covering all their bases. To us it seems crazy, even eclectic, but many parts of the world still think and worship idols this way today. If we are honest, we too can be sucked into this type of thinking – if we just do this God will be pleased with us, or because I've mucked up I'll just do this to make God happy with me. We too can fall into the trap of trying to live by works rather than working towards obedience to God's will and seeking forgiveness when we fall short. We don't ever appease the Living God by works but serve Him by faith in grace.

From a Jewish perspective what Paul was facing is well documented in Scripture, as evidenced by Psalm 135:15-18 **“The idols of the nations are silver and gold, made by human hands. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see. They have ears, but cannot hear, nor is there breath in their mouths. Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.”** And Exodus 20:3-6 **“You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God ...”** The basic message was simple. We should never worship anything man-made. There are plenty of idols that people worship today – from ancient idols of the Biblical type to modern idols from music, to vehicles, to media, to people, to sports stars, societal and industry positions. In the movie Gladiator one of the most moving scenes is of Juba the Namibian carefully burying a small bag that holds Maximus' clay idols of his wife and son who had been killed at the start of the movie. The imagery is profound – we can all carry idol bags of things that we don't want to let go of, that hold us back from the Lord's true plan for our lives. Paul understood that the scholars before him needed rescuing from their well-intended folly and ignorance.

Paul's plan of attack was brace at best: “Scholars, I am going to tell you about something of which you know nothing.” An interesting and dangerous way to approach educated people. “Hi, you are wise, but I know more than you.” Hmmm. Classic approach from Saul Alinski's 1960's rules of how to make enemies and influence people – take people onto ground they don't know about and convince them you are the expert. The Athenian scholars, to their credit, were prepared to listen. They understood, unlike

illogical atheists, that we cannot know everything and in what we don't know there may be something important. What Paul started with was not a massive problem to his hearers. God created everything. He doesn't live in human temples. He gave life. For the Greeks, Zeus (or Jupiter for the Romans) matched this description quite naturally. Paul would have had their attention by now. Then Paul moved to new ground. God created everything so that men might reach out to Him and find Him. God made us and we are in His image. The Divine is not silver or stone, that is, man-made images. God calls all men to move past this ignorance to repentance because a day of judgement by a man God has appointed is coming. This man, once dead, now resurrected is Jesus.

Now there were problems. In Greco-Roman thought humanity was the plaything of the gods. The gods and humans were fundamentally flawed and corrupt, constantly warring with one another. God's might come amongst us, even bear children, the demi-gods, of myth and legend like Hercules, but humans could not become gods. Although if they were heroic enough, they might be blessed with immortality. The thought that humanity as a whole might have a relationship with a single Almighty God was all but unthinkable. More importantly the concept of resurrection, of coming back to life with fully bodily resurrection was rejected by the Greeks and Romans. Certainly people tried to avoid Hades or return before being fully dead but as the Greek playwright and father of Greek tragedy, Aeschylus, the Greek God, Apollo, supposedly said, "When the dust drinks up a man's blood, once he has died, there is no resurrection." What Paul was preaching was an innovation, new and completely baffling to them.

There is a good lesson here for us in sharing faith with people. The very language and concepts that we can take so easily for granted may not be understood at all. Increasingly, and to our shame, less and less people in society, like these Athenians, know nothing of Jesus, resurrection or real faith. Paul was bold, brave, concise and relatively articulate in what he said. Some of the audience laughed him off calling him a philosophical babbler. Others wanted to hear more some came to faith. This is not unusual. Often coming to Jesus takes time. Even the disciples, those who first followed Jesus, often heard Jesus speak a number of times and met with Him before they became disciples. What is key, what was key, with Paul's success and failure in Athens was the degree to which he was able to build relationship with his audience. Paul's greatest success in sharing faith and building disciples was, over and over, in small groups, house groups. In Ephesus, Corinth, even Rome and multiple other towns and cities Paul brought people to faith in small groups, close encounters of a personal kind.

When, lately, some have asked me how church has been going I have said that in many ways it is going extremely well, in others it is more challenging. We have been forced back to a place where one on one relationships, small groups online and in conversation, where relationships, have been the most critical aspect of doing church. I think this is a good thing. We all have friends, family, colleagues who now, more than ever, need to be encouraged, need to know Jesus, who knows what tomorrow will bring? We are unlikely to bring them instantly, jumping and dancing, but in sharing faith carefully, faithfully, honestly in where we are at, each one of you can help someone come to know Jesus. Who are you sharing your faith with? Yes, the challenges might seem, as they must have done to Paul, almost insurmountable, we can be so close but what can we do? Like Paul we can be bold and speak out and let God do the rest, speaking with love and compassion, building on what we share together. Who knows how God will bless them and you. Before us is a time of opportunity to grow in faith and to reach

out with the love of God. We might at times feel alone, but God is always with us! And we are so close to others - what can we share with them of value if not the Lord? AMEN

