

6th Sunday of Easter Yr A, 17/05/2020

Acts 17:22-31

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“Paul’s sermon in Athens”

I begin with a couple of thought-provoking quotes. Tom Stoppard in his play *Jumpers*, describes atheism like this: “a crutch for those who cannot bear the reality of God.” The second quote comes from Lutheran professor and author, the Rev. Dr. Martin Marty: “Paul is one of those great success stories. He out-argues, out converses, out-converts others; we picture coliseums full of people responding. Yet here at Athens, according to Luke-Acts, he tries his best to meet the locals on their terms—and fails. Well, this was not a total failure: “Some scoffed, but others said, ‘We will hear you again about this.’” But Dionysius and Damaris “with others with them” did join him and become believers.” Not a stadium full, but a phone booth full.”

In order to escape some of the Jews from the synagogue in Thessalonica, who had disagreed with Paul’s preaching and driven him out of that city; as well as followed him to Borocea and stirred up crowds there; now he came to Athens. Athens was a cosmopolitan city; an important Greco-Roman cultural and intellectual centre. This was the city of such famous philosophers as Aristotle, Plato and Socrates. When Paul arrived in Athens, he is determined to share the Good News of Jesus and the resurrection in the Jewish synagogue and the agora-the marketplace. So there were people from all walks of life—including Greek Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, who brought Paul to the Areopagus. Epicureans focussed on seeking and finding joy and pleasure in life. Stoics emphasized living a quiet life by seeking and finding a balance and harmony in life and nature. The Areopagus was an ancient university of sorts—a place where intellectuals and other curious people came to study, learn and debate about anything and anyone under the sun so-to-speak.

So, in this famous place, in front of a learned and intellectual crowd, Paul begins his sermon. A sermon that, according to some scholars, follows a similar format as what philosophers like Aristotle taught regarding public speaking. In any case, Paul begins by saying something familiar to connect with his audience. He sees all of the idols in the city dedicated to a multitude of gods and goddesses. In fact, Athens had more idols than any of the other cities at that time. Most likely, Paul being of Jewish background, was disturbed by this because it transgressed the commandment of not creating

images and idols. However, he begins his sermon by telling the Athenians: “I see how extremely religious you are in every way.” He goes on to say that he saw an altar with the inscription: “To an unknown god.’

Of course, there is a big difference between being extremely religious and a person of faith. Being extremely religious focusses on doing what is necessary to please the gods and goddesses in order to get what one wants. In contrast, a person of faith realizes that we can do nothing to please God—rather, we trust in what God has done for us through the life, teaching, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. Being extremely religious involves a sense of duty: “I HAVE TO, I MUST do these things in order to get what I want from the gods and goddesses. Being a person of faith depends on GOD’S GRACE, GOD’S GIFT of forgiveness and love. In response to GOD’S GRACE, GOD’S GIFT of forgiveness and love we are free because we will WANT TO love God and love our neighbour. For most people, there is much more genuine commitment and interest in doing something because they want to; rather than those people who have to do something.

Coming back to that Athenian altar with the inscription: ‘To an unknown god,’ the Greeks had such altars as a kind of insurance policy god, a god to cover all the bases that the other gods and goddesses didn’t.

However, Paul uses that inscription to refer to the One, True God of heaven and earth. He goes on by saying what they regard as unknown, Paul knows. Paul knows this God intimately. He then tells the Athenians that this God is the Creator of the world and everything in it. The One, True God cannot be contained or confined to any place that human beings have made. Human beings cannot serve him by giving him anything that he needs from them. Rather, the One, True God is the Giver of breath and life to human beings and all things. Speaking of the human race, Paul goes on to say that it is this One, True God who determines which nation and which time period people live on earth. Since God created human beings, he gave them an instinctive desire, an in-built curiosity to seek God—even though God is not far from anyone.

In this section of Paul’s sermon, he challenged the Stoics, who believed that God was a sort of force in all nature; as well as the Epicureans, who thought that all times, places, and events were merely chance.

After that, Paul quotes the Greek poet Epimenides, saying: ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as well as another Greek poet Aratus, saying: ‘For we too are his offspring.’ Both of these quotations were employed by Paul to refer to the One, True

God—not any of the Greek deities. The first quote reaffirming what he said earlier about God as Creator and Life-Giver; and the second one referring to our intimate relationship with God as members of God’s family. As God’s offspring, God’s children, members of God’s family; God wants our hands, hearts and whole lives devoted to him. He wants us to be so inspired by the perfect example that Jesus set for us in his public ministry; that we love and serve God by loving our neighbour. In contrast to the religious leaders who defined being religious by tithing mint, dill and cummin; Jesus said they neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. Jesus provided the perfect example of faith active in love by welcoming, loving, caring for and accepting prostitutes, tax collectors and other sinners. We too are called to respond with our faith active in love by welcoming, loving, caring for and accepting the most vulnerable and needy amongst us. In so doing, we come to a growing sense of gratitude for our place in God’s family as his offspring.

Paul continues with this train of thought about our relationship with God as offspring by stating that such a relationship shall not worship or serve God with images and idols made out of gold, silver, stone, and the art and imagination of people. There has always been the temptation among human beings to worship and serve what people create than worship and serve God. Money, power, status can become gods for some people. So can sports, computers and technological items, and a thousand other things that take too much of our time and commitment away from the One, True God. However, in the end, these other, false gods are not able to help or save us—only the One, True God through Jesus can do that!

Paul then goes on to end his sermon with a call to repentance; a reference to the day of judgement; and which will be presided over by Jesus whom God resurrected from the dead.

This conclusion was not well received by most of the Athenian audience. In their intellectual sense of pride and superiority, they had no need to repent of anything. Everything they knew philosophically was good enough for them—why should they change? Paul’s talk of a judgement day made no sense to most of them. Moreover, they had never heard of a resurrection before, or if they had, they would be offended by it—since they believed in the immortality of the soul, NOT the resurrection of the body. For them the body was something to get rid of after this life. Paul’s talk of a resurrected body—albeit a spiritual body—would offend them. So, most of them “scoffed” at Paul’s sermon. Some said they would listen to Paul again another time, perhaps out of

politeness, rather than any genuine commitment. Yet others, only a few, heard Paul's sermon with open hearts and minds, and became believers. Two of them are named: Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris. Dionysius was a member of the Court of the Areopagus, which was the governing power of the city. So he was obviously a prominent citizen. Later tradition has it that he actually went on to become bishop of Athens. As for Damaris, there is no information about her. However, the fact that she is named may be an indication that she was an early, influential woman and leader in the Athenian church.

So, whenever we, like Paul, share our faith in the risen Jesus, our sharing most likely will not convert hundreds, thousands or millions. However, even if one or two persons come into the Christian faith after we have shared the Good News, you never know how the Lord can work through them—they might be a Dionysius or a Damaris and God may work through them to reach many others.

I end my sermon today, like I began it, with another thought-provoking quote, this time from Martin Luther. There are no atheists. Martin Luther made clear that everyone has a god: "A god is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need. To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe him with our whole heart... For those two belong together, faith and God. That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God."

So, may your heart and my heart cling to and entrust itself to Jesus, our risen Lord and Saviour! Amen.