

## Easter VI, 2020 (17.5.20)

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

### *Paul in Athens*

In last week's New Testament reading, you might remember, we caught a glimpse of St. Paul before he was St. Paul. Back before he was a Christian; when he was still called Saul; and he was part of the mob stoning St. Stephen to death. Saul thought that Christians like Stephen were a threat to the very existence of Israel. They were going to blur the boundaries between God's people and the rest of the world to such an extent that holiness would just be lost. First would come pork and laxity about circumcision, soon all would be lost in a sea of idol worship and immorality.

It's sometimes tempting for us to write all this off as some kind of unattractive Jewish superiority complex. All those rules about keeping apart, keeping pure, not marrying the wrong kind of people, about maintaining the right kind of social distance lest you get infected by paganism. And some of it is indeed deeply unattractive, and we love to contrast how Jesus seems to have been decidedly more relaxed about that kind of thing. Ritual and ethnic purity, it seems, was not the highest thing on his agenda.

But it's actually a complicated picture. Because Jesus *also* said things like, 'I tell you: unless your righteousness *exceeds* that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven.' Jesus is *not* actually wholly relaxed about these things. Because while the risk of emphasising purity and distinction and separation is that you end up with pride and arrogance – the risk of relaxation is something else. You might be blended into the world. It'll always be easier to live by the world's standards than God's: easier to fall in love with money, easier to be undisciplined sexually, easier to neglect the poor and the weak. To go against the flow is hard, and it is risky, but if we don't do it there'll be no example, no what the Bible calls 'light to the nations' – no community where the world can be told: 'look, here's how it is done. Here is what God wants.' Israel was called, and the church is called, to be an example – and you can't be an example if you just give up and blend in.

That good instinct is what led Saul, catastrophically, to the murder of Stephen. Now fast forward ten chapters and x years in the Apostle's life, to Acts 17 and the speech of Paul on the Areopagus, in Athens. We're in not Jerusalem anymore, not in God's country. We are at the very beating heart of paganism: Athens! Where the most sophisticated philosophies and the most extravagant paganism swirl together, where some scholars say *thousands* of gods were worshipped, with the Acropolis and the Parthenon towering over you, a city oozing with power and glory and sophistication and sex and sleaze. Paul is called to preach – the Greek almost suggests he is put on a kind of intellectual trial – right at the heart of all this. We know that every fibre of his being has been trained and educated to find the whole thing repulsive. This is the world against which Israel was called to define itself, the darkness in which she was to be light. So what will Paul the Christian say?

Well, first that even this pagan darkness is not *just* darkness. There is, after all, only one God. And that God has arranged things so that each people, in its different ways, 'would search for God, and perhaps grope for Him, and find Him.' Note that: grope for Him, *and find Him*. So even in Athens, in all its repugnance, there is genuine searching for God, and real knowledge of God. It might be confused – for Paul, it certainly *is* confused. It might be mixed up with all sorts of appalling things. It might not even know itself – hence Paul being so struck by that humble altar, with the inscription 'to an unknown God.' But it's there, because God is the God of the whole world, and He wants *all* his children to find him. And all his children have a sort of kinship or homing instinct for Him. As one of your own poets said, says Paul, in him we live and move and have our being. God is not far from any one of you.

So, pagan darkness is not just darkness. It is to some extent, at least, *promise*. It contains a searching for God, a waiting for God, a thirst for God. Here's the most daring way of putting it, perhaps: Idolatry is not just to be condemned. It's to be corrected. It's to be rechannelled. There's something good, or at least there *could* be something good, in what to all Paul's training seemed most repugnant. There's something of God – or at least there *could* be – even in this.

Now of course, Paul remains all the time an Apostle, an evangelist. He wants to see people convert; he thinks they desperately need saved from the mess they are in. The

darkness might not be *just* darkness, but nor is it light. That's why his speech goes onto proclaim Jesus: Jesus as the definitive revelation of the God they've been searching for without knowing it, Jesus as the one in whom all their questing meets its end, Jesus as the desire of the nations. The Gentiles have been groping for God, searching for Him, and to some degree even finding Him. But Paul's Gospel is: He has come looking for you. Here he is, in this man, in his fullness. Jesus Christ, crucified and risen: pledge loyalty to Him, shape your life around Him, and all that you were searching for will be yours.

Well, What does all this mean for us? We don't live in Athens. In many ways, we live somewhere very, very unlike Athens. We have enough trouble believing in one God, let alone hundreds and hundreds of them. Or is that actually true? Someone once rather sensibly defined a God as 'that which you worship', and if that's so there are many gods even in our rational, scientific culture. What do people worship? What do they organise their lives around, and devote themselves to?

Think of it like that, and there's actually quite a pantheon: Beauty. Approval. Sex. Pleasure. Justice. Wisdom. Power. The Country. The Future. Honour. Happiness. These are all *gods*. Not supernatural beings on clouds with beards, but powers which claim our loyalty and shape our lives. And in Bible-language, even if they are in themselves good things, insofar as you worship them they become idols. And if you're not sure what worship means: well, what is it you sacrifice for? Sacrifice time, sacrifice money, perhaps even sacrifice people: whatever it is, behold your god. People of Abbots Langley and Bedmond, Paul would say, as I went through the parish and inspected your objects of worship, I saw how extremely religious you are in every way.

And crucially, he wouldn't say that to condemn. Or at least, not *just* to condemn. Some of the gods might even be quite honourable, as far as they go. But Paul's whole point is that they don't go very far. Don't you see, he would say, that you were made for more? Don't you see that there is a desire planted in you for something bigger and deeper and more real than *any* idol can provide? Don't you see that all of this – however good it is in itself – isn't enough? You know, don't you, that deep down sense of unease, of out of tune-ness, dissatisfaction .... Well, don't deny it. And don't

ignore it. That is your spiritual alarm system. That is your idol-detection system. The things to which you are giving yourself are not worth it. They are not the answer to the question of *you*. There is one who is worth it. There is one, who if you meet Him, who if you worship, who if you give yourself, will make you whole. There is one you were made for: the true God, made known in Jesus.

And that's the Gospel. That's why the movement that started in Jerusalem went to Athens; went from there to Rome, and from Rome eventually to Abbots Langley. To say to people that whoever, whenever, wherever you are some things stay the same. We are all God's children. We're all searching for Him, groping for Him and perhaps even to some extent finding Him. He is not far from any of us, and in him we live and move and have our being. And after all, he wants to be found. Indeed, more than that, He has come looking. He has come to find us, in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the One in whom all our hungers are satisfied. He is the One in whom the whole story makes sense. He is the One to whom all other gods will one day pay tribute. If you would know life, follow Him.

To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.