

Wheatley United Reformed Church
Sunday 17 May 2020 – Easter 6
Acts 17.16-31

In my previous life on the south coast I sang in a large choir. One year we went to Athens to perform Beethoven's Choral Symphony and Benjamin Britten's War Requiem under the stars in the Roman amphitheatre below the Acropolis. During free time between rehearsals I visited the agora, the historic market-place of Athens, where St Paul had argued with some of the great minds of what was still the cultural and intellectual centre of the Roman Empire. His reception was mixed. You can almost hear their effortless superiority and the scorn in their voices: what on earth was this Jew from an obscure province babbling on about? They were the heirs of Plato and Aristotle, of Stoics and Epicureans, and they loved to talk down the sun with their speculations and arguments. Having spent my life in academia, I recognise the type. Nevertheless, Paul is taken off to make his case before the Areopagus, a court named after the hill on which it met. What can he say to these people, who know nothing of the Hebrew Scriptures and will find the whole notion of a crucified and risen Messiah at best puzzling and at worst ridiculous?

Paul's answer is evangelism in action. The word makes many of us uncomfortable. We recoil from the simplistic theologies of street preachers, from multi-millionaire tele-evangelists preying on gullible people, from threatening hellfire or otherwise battering people into submission. We find it hard to recognise the way of Jesus of Nazareth there. If we think of evangelism, it is through personal contact, pastoral care and service to the community: the witness of people who try to show how divine love incarnate in Christ can reshape people's lives. In some ways the task is harder for us than for Paul, as he moves out of the familiar territory of synagogues and Scripture and adapts his message for the world of classical civilization, with its gods, its temples and its love of reason. Two thousand years of often murky and bloody history have passed. Christians have cheerfully slaughtered one another as well as those of other faiths. They have persecuted those who dared to question their version of the truth and many have resisted the advance of science and changing attitudes, all in the name of Scripture. So it's not surprising that modern people, having heard what they think

Christians have to offer, show no interest in it and largely reject it as childish, hypocritical and intellectually bankrupt. I recall one of my colleagues saying that you either believed the Bible or science, as if Christians were expected to set their face against any scientific explanation of the world. Trying to commend the Christian way in such an environment is at least as hard as Paul's task in Athens. But it is a ministry I have been engaged in all my adult life and I take heart from his approach.

The first thing to notice about Paul's speech is how different it is from the usual proclamations of the Gospel in Acts, the longest of which is Stephen's testimony before his martyrdom, in Acts 7. Gone are the appeals to the evidence of the Hebrew Scriptures: Paul knows that he cannot persuade his hearers by combing through Biblical texts. He has to begin where they are, to find common ground, and he needs a strategy which encourages rather than alienates them. So though Luke tells us that Paul is very angry to find the city so full of idols, when he addresses the Council he doesn't go into full attack mode, as the Hebrew Scriptures do, ridiculing those who worship bits of wood and stone. However wrong-headed he thinks they are, however exasperated by their foolish idolatry, he takes a more positive approach, commending them for their commitment to the spiritual realm: 'I see how extremely religious you are in every way'. Then he seizes on something he has noticed in the city, an altar dedicated to an 'unknown god'. Taking this as his cue, only then does he proceed to set before them the true nature of this hidden deity.

God doesn't live in shrines and temples, he says. God is the origin of all that is and has no need of anything. All life proceeds from him. This isn't a specifically Jewish or a Christian view. It's common ground. The people Paul is addressing would have agreed with him. Educated Greeks and Romans did not think that idols were real gods and many of them believed in one God, who was beyond human comprehension yet in some manner governed human life in all its variety. What Paul says next is remarkable, so different from the kind of evangelism which we may find hard to stomach. God has planted a spiritual instinct in everyone, 'so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him'. At the same time, God is not far away, but near each one of us. To prove his point he quotes two passages from Greek poetry: 'in him we live and move and have our being', and 'we too are his offspring'.

Only then does he move on to speak about Jesus, though he never names the man whom God has raised from the dead.

It's important to grasp what Paul is doing. He has found in Greek poetry, which is not the living word of God, a testimony to the nature of God. Both quotations from it are entirely in accord with Scripture: think of the way St John writes about our becoming children of God in the Prologue to his Gospel. We are told that some of his hearers believed him, including a council member called Dionysius, whose name would become attached to some of the most important writings of early Christian mysticism, and a woman named Damaris: no male exclusivism here. The implications of Paul's approach both for evangelism and for dialogue between faiths and philosophies are great. We don't attack people for being wrong, we look for common ground. We don't batter them with the Bible, we look for points of connection. Only then is it appropriate to speak of God's work in Jesus Christ, reconciling the world to himself. So there's no need to feel guilty that we don't shout from the rooftops or preach salvation on every street-corner. There's another, maybe better way, of establishing common ground and finding connections between where people are and the call of the Gospel.

One of the interesting things that has been happening during lockdown is that far more people are tuning into church services on line than ever attend church on Sundays. Are they too are searching after God and wondering if there's anything there for them? Are some are finding help and inspiration? It's an unexpected by-product of these testing times. What common ground can we and they find, what points of connection between their search and God's grace shining in the face of Jesus Christ? When Paul preached in Athens he was living true to his vision that the Gospel broke down barriers of class and race and culture. I long for our churches to be more diverse, communities in which people of all ages, backgrounds and inclinations find that what unites them in Christ is of much greater value than what divides them in society, and discover that by worshipping and working together they can practise Christ's work of healing and reconciliation. Even then, we have only just begun. For however much we find, we are always searchers on the way. However much we try to teach and to live the way of love, we are always learners in the school of Christ.