

MEETING PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE

Acts 17. 22 – 31

1 Peter 3. 13-22

John 14. 15 – 21

I speak to you in the name of the † Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Athens! Who hasn't heard of Athens? More than twenty-five hundred years ago, Athens was the leading city-state in ancient Greece; and even after it was incorporated into the Roman Empire, it was a free city, one that was proud of its intellectual independence, its rich philosophical tradition, its literature and art, and its notable achievements in the cause of human freedom. Today, when we read about ancient Athens, many of us can't help but be struck by its greatness.

When St Paul visited Athens for the first time, he must have been struck by it too, just as we are. The buildings and monuments of Athens were unrivalled. The acropolis, the town's ancient citadel, was elevated enough to be seen from miles around; the Parthenon had a unique grandeur; the *Agora*, or market, was famous for its painted porticoes; and the *Aeropagus*, right near the market, was the hill where the supreme legal council had met years previously.

But as he walked around Athens, Paul was struck by another thing. Athens was absolutely filled with temples, shrines, statues and altars. In the Parthenon stood a huge gold and ivory statue of Athena, the Greek goddess of war and wisdom; in her hand, she held a spear, and her statue was so imposing that you could see her gleaming spear-point forty miles away. Elsewhere, there were images of Apollo, the patron of Athens; of Jupiter, Venus, Mercury, Bacchus, Neptune, Diana and other Greek gods and goddesses. The whole Greek pantheon was there, all the gods of the Olympus. And their statues were beautiful works of art. They were

made not only of stone and brass, but of gold, silver, ivory and marble, and they had been fashioned by the finest Greek sculptors.

As Paul looked at these statues, he was not indifferent to their beauty; but we are told in the paragraph that precedes our given reading that he was 'deeply distressed'. Why do you think that he was distressed? Well, he saw that the Greeks were totally given over to their worship of these gods, goddesses and idols. The Greeks were so superstitious and so religious that they had even erected an altar 'to an unknown god', just in case they had left one out.

Paul's distress led him to take action; and we're told that he went to the synagogue, to the *Agora* or market, and then to the *Aeropagus* to talk to the Athenians about God. His distress led him to constructively witness in three separate places which provided him with access to three different segments of the local population.

In the synagogue, Paul talked not only with Jews, but with God-fearing Greeks. The synagogue provided a ready-made preaching situation with a building, regularly-scheduled meetings, and people who knew the Old Testament scriptures. It was also customary at synagogues to invite visitors, and especially visiting rabbis such as Paul to address their gatherings.

At the *Agora* on the other hand, there was not one building, but rather a cluster of many buildings. The market-place in Athens was not only the centre of business and trading, but of city life; and in going there Paul was able to mix with all sorts of people and passers-by.

And finally, we read in the paragraph just before our text that a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers brought Paul to the *Aeropagus* so that they could hear more about the 'new teaching' that he was presenting. In Paul's time, the *Aeropagus* was a

place of meeting for philosophers and for the wise men who considered themselves to be the custodians of religious and moral teaching. In this place, Paul was able to witness to the *crème de la crème* of Greek intelligentsia.

We see, then, that Paul's burden for the people of Athens led him firstly to *go out to them* and to meet them where they were. But not only did Paul go out to meet the Athenians geographically; we see that he made a point of meeting people where they were intellectually and culturally. In verse 28 of our text, we see that Paul actually integrates quotes from three Greek, non-Christian writers into his speech. When he says, 'for in him we live and move and have our being', Paul is actually quoting the poet Epimenides, who lived in Crete in 600 B.C. and who wrote this verse in praise of the Supreme God in his work *Cretica*. And when Paul says, 'we too are his offspring'; it is a quote from two separate Greek poems written in praise of Zeus by Aratus and Cleathus, who both lived in the third century B.C.

One might be tempted to question why Paul used non-Christian literary references to speak of the one Eternal God. It seems, however, that Paul was remaining faithful to the approach he has already demonstrated. Having gone out to seek those who needed to hear the message of Christ in Athens, Paul then made every attempt to come alongside them and start with *local, known points of reference* that they could understand.

Notice that when Paul appears before the meeting of the *Aeropagus*, he says in verse 22: 'Athenians, I see how religious you are in every way.' In his desire to reach out to the Athenians, Paul addressed them right where they were spiritually. He continues: 'For as I went through the city and *looked carefully* at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god". What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.'

Paul could have told the people of Athens that the unknown god was not the God of the Jews and the Christians, and that they had got it all wrong. But he didn't. His tone is not accusing. It is not hostile. 'What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.' Starting from a point of reference that they knew and understood, the altar to an unknown god, Paul used it as a bridge to preach about the one true God who sent our Lord into the world to redeem it.

What did Paul preach exactly? A close look at the text¹ reveals that Paul declared five truths about God in his speech. He proclaimed that:

- God is the Creator of the universe (17. 24);
- he is the Sustainer of life (17. 25);
- he is the Ruler of all nations (17: 26, 27, 28a);
- he is the Father of all human beings (17. 28b, 29);
- and that he is the Judge of the world (17. 30, 31).

Thanks to Acts 17, we have seen that Paul's witness to the people in Athens was born out of true concern, and that it led him to meet them where they were, geographically, intellectually, culturally and spiritually; and that he pointed them ultimately to Jesus. Paul preached the full gospel of the Scriptures and presented the Athenians with an integrated world-view that made sense of their experience. On this basis alone, we can draw some very meaningful lessons for our contemporary Christian witness today.

Perhaps many of us do not feel motivated to speak of our faith, as Paul did; perhaps we are far from experiencing the 'deep distress' that Paul did when he entered that Greek town that was given over to idolatry. And in order for Paul to feel as he felt, he had to *see*. His motivation for mission all began with his eyes. When Paul walked round Athens, he did not just 'notice' the idols; he observed

¹ An earlier verse (18) reveals that Paul 'was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection'.

them and considered them. He looked and looked, and thought and thought, and then was inspired by the Holy Spirit to act.

Today, as we consider our Christian motivation to witness, we would do well to remember the words that we heard a moment ago from the Gospel of St John. Christ has promised to give us his Holy Spirit; and perhaps we should be asking the Holy Spirit to help us to 'see' our surroundings as Paul saw his; to 'counsel'² us concerning those to whom we should go with the message of the love of Christ; and to enable us to obey his commands, including that great command which was to go and make disciples of all nations.

Amen.

² Some translations of the Bible refer to the Holy Spirit as a 'Counsellor' rather than an 'Advocate' (NRSV).