

Community in new places

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne St James May 2017

Keynote Bible passages: Acts 17.22 – 31, John 14.15 – 21

One of the great cities of the age of Jesus and St Paul was Athens. It is surprising perhaps there's no letter of Paul to the Athenians. What we do have is the *sermon content* of what Paul when given opportunity spoke about. This visit to Athens has significance for expanding on today's theme, *Community in new places*. St Paul's mission was to visit towns in the Roman world of the day to preach the good news of Jesus Christ, to establish Christian communities and encourage the followers of Jesus. This morning's excerpt is from Paul's second missionary journey through regions of Greece and onto Turkey.

- 1) Let's begin with the *context of the reading* we heard. This from the preceding verses is interesting in itself (from preceding verses of the section). Paul has been in *Berea* a town to the north of Athens and here he has preached the gospel and there's been a positive response to his message as '...many believed, including not a few Greek women and men of high standing.' Word had spread and some Jews had come into town and opposed Paul's preaching and stirred up the locals. So the believers brought him down to Athens. It was when walking through this great city Paul observed many statues of Greek gods and goddesses (Luke writes 'he was distressed to see that the city was full of idols'). Paul then visited the synagogue and talks to 'Jews and other devout persons'.

Athens was also the centre of a long tradition of Greek philosophy, and Paul gets into a discussion with men of two of the schools of thought – Epicureans and Stoics. They were curious about this message Paul was bringing especially about the matter of Jesus' resurrection of the dead. Some said, 'what does this babbling want to say?' (That's the translation of Athenian slang of a 'bird-pecker' - as picking up seeds from here and there on ploughed land. Referring to a speaker it meant picking up random ideas and thoughts from here and there. There was open opportunity for free speech in Athens. The philosopher listeners figured Paul might have a message of significance so he is brought to the town centre, the Areopagus. The locals ask what is this new teaching that you are presenting? This provides Paul opportunity to give his message. What is of particular significance is that it's the first recorded message of the gospel to an audience not having a background of the Hebrew Bible or Jewish thought. That's significant for us too as increasingly today the population at large are becoming less and less aware of Biblical teaching and knowledge. Then follows the sermon summary we'll consider in a moment.

The outcome of the sermon we don't get to hear in the today's reading. So here it is briefly - some scoff about the resurrection of the dead aspect. Others are interested and want to hear more. Luke records some did become believers and two are noted – Dionysius the Areopagite, and Damaris. Dionysios was one of the intellectual elite of the city and Damaris, being a woman may have been less reputable as it wasn't the custom of respectable Greek women to appear at public meetings. Thus Luke is telling of the gospel as being a universal message. Paul's visit to Athens then was not without impact, although it probably wasn't as successful as he would have liked.

From there Paul goes on to the great city of Corinth and there was a much greater impact of his message and the founding of a Christian community.

2) Now to Paul's message, the *content of the sermon*. He has been quite moved by what he observed and comments 'Athenians I see you are extremely religious in every way'. He acknowledges this and notes there's one inscribed: 'To god, unknown.' This was likely to be there just in case one god had been overlooked and the locals didn't want to upset this god. Paul adapts to his audience and rather than quoting scripture quotes from his own knowledge of Greek poets. He then reveals the nature of this 'unknown god.' How profound it is: 'creator, one who made the world and all in it, one who does not live in man-made temples, one who doesn't need anything humans can supply, one who gives life and breath 'in him we live and move and have our being', one who created humanity spread throughout the world, one who created in humanity something that would want them to search for God, one who indeed is not far from any of us.' Then the sermon comes to its climax, a personal appeal for all to turn from evil ways and that there will be a day of accounting of judgment. The proof that it is real was if God raised Jesus from the dead, God can do all this. One might surely affirm Paul packed a lot into his sermon and we are indebted for it being recorded in Acts.

What then might be the relevance of this for the message of mission today? One might see parallels of our cities to Athens, of 'places of worship' – Westpac Stadium for rugby, sky city casino for gambling, high-rise commercial buildings, monuments to the gods of the economic age. Yet just as Paul perceived the people of Athens needed to hear the gospel in their context, so have Christians and the church today a message to offer. This message is especially emphasised in the gospel of John, as in today's reading. It might seem simple yet also profound, the *message of love* still applies. John records Jesus as saying, 'if you love me you will keep my commandments.' The command is simple - to love God, and one's neighbour as oneself. A 'picture' I find helpful is of the colours of a prism which come from reflected sunlight – as in a rainbow. Those 'colours' include the *qualities* of forgiveness, kindness, peacefulness, compassion, thankfulness, gentleness, generosity.... and others in the lists in St Paul's letters. If Christianity has anything to offer society in these days and I believe it has, it is these qualities, these values. Along with this love, is '*love in community*' – we call it church. As St Paul notes in his sermon, 'we are God's children' (or God's off-spring'). As we consider our own living, surely this love in community is expressed in our meeting in worship and sharing. For me it is 'bottom line' and so important. Yet the sad part is the observation in the Beatles song of yesteryear about society: 'All the lonely people, where do they all belong?'

3) *Community in new places*: What does the church and believers have as a message for today's society? May I suggest the clues for the content of the message is in today's reading. Can we as St Paul did at Athens, adapt the message into the context of society? Again surely yes.

First in the nature of the God in whom we believe, the God of creation, 'in whom we live and move and have our being'. Second it is the vast breadth and height and depth of love, offered to all and able to be experienced by humanity. And thirdly as the theme last week reminded us, it can be through Jesus, risen from the dead, and 'the Way and the truth and the Life.' What is 'key' for all who would follow is relationship

– having a relationship with Jesus, friend and brother, with Jesus who invited us to abide in him as he abides in us.

To summarise, we are mindful of Paul's presence and his presenting the message of Jesus in the city of Athens. We note how he 'empathised' with the local customs and conveyed his message in words they could 'hear'. As part of this in his witness he is able to convey the relevance of Jesus rising from the dead. As we seek to apply lessons, can we refer back to the Collect of today. Here we pray that as Christians we may bring Jesus into every walk of life. That means in our homes, at work, in community, in creation and in relationships. As we thus serve him in his mission to the world, together we witness to his love. God is not far from each of us, for 'in him we live and move and have our being.'