

Sermon preached on 23 August Evensong on Acts 17: 15-34

Paul wasn't really meant to be in Athens; it wasn't on his itinerary. Trouble had followed him and Silas in other places – beatings, imprisonment, stoning – as local Jews stirred up opposition to him, so he was taken by friends to Athens to be safe. Here, he is waiting for Silas and Timothy to join him. After all he'd been through, he could have decided God wasn't with him, but he didn't – he took it as an opportunity to reach out to the Gentiles. **Athens is a bustling cosmopolitan Graeco-Roman city,** a centre of trade and commerce, with a renowned university, and lots of tourists. The Athenians are renowned for their interest in every new trend that comes their way. Something like London is today.

He goes to the local synagogue, and debates with the Jews there, and to the **marketplace (Agora),** where much debate is also going on. The locals enjoy a good debate, so he is taken to **Areopagus,** the equivalent of the local council hall, to speak to the citizens (that is, males of a certain social standing) of Athens. They identify his message as 'strange' 'babblings' (18) and want to hear more. As a Jew, but also a Roman citizen, educated under distinguished teachers, how does he decide to speak? His answer is a brilliant, **how-to lesson about preaching, particularly** in a culture which is different from your own.

1. Using the common rhetorical pattern which all speech givers used in those days, **he begins where they are,** in a positive way, making a connection, praising the religious fervor of the city (22), even though we know from an earlier verse (16) that he is 'distressed about the many idols'.
2. **He notices the empty pedestal 'to the unknown god'.** He is aware of an emptiness at the core of their worldview, for all the plurality of gods about. Quantity hasn't produced happiness, it seems. Nor, perhaps, wealth, or great intelligence, philosophy or learning.
3. **He claims to know this 'unknown God', the creator God,** source of all life (*zoe*) and breath (*pneuma*), master of the universe, and generous giver of all things to all nations. God has no favourites – all may seek God's face.
4. **Humanity is created to 'seek God'.** Paul applauds those who are 'groping' for this unknown God, because God is not far from us, as close as our breath, using quotes from two Greek poets (Epimenides and Aratus, a Stoic) to enlarge on what he is saying, that all life, Jew and Athenian alike, derives from this Origin, this God, from the first movement in the womb.
5. **This God, who made us, doesn't need to be worshiped with gods of stone, wood and gold** – God doesn't live in houses we have made, to be ministered to by human hands. God cannot be bribed.
6. Having laid the groundwork, got their attention, found commonalities, even used their very different culture, **only then does he introduce a Christian claim,** that the resurrected 'man whom God appointed' is the one and same God of life and breath. We know this 'appointed man' is Jesus Christ, but Paul doesn't name him.

7. **The time of ignorance is over.** Paul does not want to add just another god to their gallery; this God, the only true God, calls on everyone to repent in preparation for the judgment of the world with justice which God brings through 'the appointed man' who has been raised from the dead.

Notice the difference in the way other sermons have been recorded by Luke, when the audience is a Jewish mob, e.g in Acts 22. Paul addresses them in Hebrews, and talks about his Damascus experience,. Or Peter addressing Jews in Acts 1. He begins with passages quoted from the prophets, tracing the Davidic lineage of Jesus, and emphasizes the crucifixion. **The response to what Paul says** is something like the parable of the soils that Jesus preached of the response to the seed being scattered far and wide. Some scoffed; some wanted to hear more, and some became believers, joining him. Paul didn't condemn those who didn't convert; he just left when it was time. He recognized that the seed was sown, and God would give the increase.

So, **cross-cultural communication (or even cross-generation communication!)**. One in which the church respects society and different expressions of it and speaks to the world on terms the world will respect, presenting its own unique faith for others to consider, offering an invitation for those interested and willing to join us. Reminding ourselves that every person uses metaphors to imagine and address God, and we often don't like other people's metaphors.

When we share with an 'other' (perhaps even a Christian of another 'brand'), we: 1. Set aside assumptions about what I find offensive. 2. Find a beginning with a shared vision of God. 3. Attempt to meet the 'other' within their own spiritual landscape. 4. Speak in ways that are different from those we use in our own community. 5. And we then will reveal Christ standing on the common ground we have established, offering new life. 6. Give the listener freedom to decide: at times, we may need to take our leave, trusting our hearers to God. Who we are as a communicator of the Good News of Jesus doesn't depend on the response. That's **Openness, Deep Listening, being imaginative, being Brave, and being truly free about the response.**

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