

Christ proclaimed in Athens

Littlebourne - 23rd July 2023 - Acts 17:16-34

Last week's text saw Paul in Thessalonica and Berea. We saw two very different reactions to the gospel that Paul brought. On the one hand, the Thessalonians, who didn't accept it at all and drove Paul out of town. On the other, the Bereans, who sought to examine the scriptures to determine the truth of Paul's words.

Well the Thessalonians aren't happy and travel to Berea to stir up trouble. Paul is sent off by sea, to Athens. Athens is a long way away, but as we've seen in Acts before, long distances are covered quickly by sea. When he arrives, he sends back word for Timothy and Silas to come as soon as possible.

Athens was an important place - it was the closest thing at the time to classical ancient Greece. Despite being under Roman rule, since 146 BC, it was still the Athens of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, with many of the old traditions and structures. It was the heart of philosophy that influenced not only Greece, but the whole Roman world, and still influences us today. Stoicism, a philosophy we see in this passage, had a lasting impact on Roman life as it was embraced by emperors and nobility. At the time Paul is there, Greek is the lingua franca of most of the Roman world, and the Greek culture influenced everything.

What Paul finds in this city is not just high minded intellectualism though.

v16-18

16 Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. 17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. 18 Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, "What does this babbling wish to say?" Others said, "He

| seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.

As soon as Paul gets to the city he notices the idolatry. It was apparently very obvious in Athens at the time. Roman writer at roughly the same time as this, Petronius, said that it was easier to find a god in Athens than a man (Satyricon, chapter 17). Idolatry is a major issue there and Paul realised this. The majority of the city was surely involved with the worship of idols, but Paul finds two groups that aren't so interested in them - the Jews and the philosophers.

As we've seen again and again, Paul makes a beeline to the local synagogue, so that he can talk to the Jews in the city. He also in this case goes to the marketplace and meets with the people there - a similar approach to what he's been doing in the previous cities.

He also meets with some of the philosophers of the city. The two groups mentioned are the Epicureans and the Stoics, who had different views on life, and formed the two major philosophies of first century Athens.

Epicureanism, founded by Epicurus around 307 BC, was a philosophy teaching that life was for pleasure, a form of hedonism, but that such a life came from simple living and eliminating pain, unhelpful desires, and fear. These were people that avoided politics for example, because that lead to frustration and ambition, and so was in conflict with the pursuit of peace of mind and pleasure. They were materialists, sceptical of anything religious and avoiding all superstitions they could. They didn't rule out the existence of deities, but didn't think they interfered in human affairs at all. They thought also that the soul was like the body, material and mortal, so no afterlife, no resurrection. The common epitaph on the graves of Epicureans was this *Non fui, fui, non sum, non curo* "I was not; I have been; I am not; I do not mind."

Stoicism on the other hand was a philosophy founded by Zeno of Citium (that's in Cyprus) around 300 BC. They were all about practising virtue in order to live in harmony with nature. They took actions over words - what someone did was considered more important than their professed beliefs. They didn't think that external matters mattered much - health, wealth, pleasure, are not considered good or bad in themselves, but what you do with them, whether you act virtuously is the measure of goodness. They took nature very seriously, and thought that all things were rooted in nature. To live a good life was to understand and act in accordance with the rules of nature. The name of this group comes from the ποικίλη στοά, or painted porch, a colonnade on the north side of the marketplace in Athens where Zeno and his followers gathered to discuss ideas. Stoicism typically equates God with the totality of the universe - they're pantheists. Stoicism was very

popular in the Roman world for centuries, and Christianity borrows some terms from them. For example, the word *logos* used by John to describe Jesus Christ, was used by Stoics to describe the active reason that pervades and animates the universe, a sort of logic underpinning everything.

Both of these schools of thought stressed the need for peace of mind - they were both interested primarily in living a life of happiness or contentment, but in different ways.

You can see the two different reactions to Paul might fit these philosophies. He's just a talker say the Stoics, they want to see some actions, that's what impresses them. The Epicureans want to just dismiss this talk of divinities - they're practical atheists. Paul is talking about Jesus and the resurrection, and they both immediately see things that they don't agree with.

v19-21

19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean." 21 Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

Areopagus means hill of Ares, Ares being the god of war and courage. It referred both to a particular rocky hill in Athens, near the Acropolis, and the council of Athens that met there in centuries past. You'll sometimes hear it translated as 'Mars' Hill' as well, Mars being the nearest equivalent Roman god to Ares.

At this point in time, the Areopagus in the sense of the council had moved down the hill to the marketplace area. They were the ruling council of Athens for many matters, including religious disputes. Athens had been conquered by the Romans two centuries before, but the council was still kept as the main ruling entity in the city.

It's not clear if Paul talked at the top of the hill, or at the bottom of it in the marketplace - either way, he is in the presence of the most important people in Athens. Despite their obvious disagreements with Paul's message on the face of it, these people are interested in what he had to say, so they bring him to the place where all the disputes and debates take place to hear him out.

The ordinary idol worshippers of Athens were no doubt interested in having another god to worship, and if Paul was bringing that they were interested. Both the Epicureans and Stoics sought new things - either in their quest for new pleasures or in their desire to understand more of nature and live by it. The whole city is described as doing nothing but talk about new things, so Paul, the first Christian to reach the city, would be an object of great curiosity.

So of course, Paul seizes the opportunity.

v22-23

22 So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. 23 For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

Paul starts by observing the situation in Athens, the large amount of idols. But he notices that they also have an altar 'to the unknown God'. They want to ensure that no gods were left out of worship - a sort of catch all altar. So the Athenians know there is more than just the gods they know about - they have some sense of something else, some other god, that they should worship in some way, but they don't know the details.

Mankind was made to know God - we were created for relationship with Him. Since that broke down in the fall, since Adam hid from God, humanity has sought that relationship elsewhere. The Greeks sought the benefits that only God can provide in their multitudes of idols, but still they realise that something is missing. We sometimes talk about a God-shaped hole that we have, and that's true enough. But unless God so transforms us, our natural tendency is to fill such a hole with anything but God, which never quite fits, because nothing is a substitute for the true God, as Paul explains.

v24-25

24 The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

Paul starts by saying that this unknown God that they worship is not like other gods, on five accounts:

1. The true God is the creator of all things, the world and everything in it. Greek gods could be creative, but there's no one god they had that created everything.
2. The true God is Lord of heaven and earth. Greek gods were constantly warring to be in charge, but the true God exists above the fray and is the true ruler of all things. This also implies that He is personal. It's neither that the world itself is the ultimate god, like the Stoics thought - pantheism, or that there was no god interested in men, like the Epicureans thought. Rather the true God is personally interested in His creation, which implies there is judgement, which is something Paul gets to shortly.
3. The true God does not live in temples made by man. Greek gods all lived somewhere - they were limited to physical space and time, but the true God is not limited in such a way.
4. The true God is not served by human hands, as though he needed anything. Greek gods, like all false gods, were needy. They constantly needed worship and validation, they require things of people, they take, they're capricious. The true God is one that has no needs from His creation, He doesn't require anything of us for His own benefit.
5. The true God gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. The false gods take, the true God gives. He is the source of life, rather than one who requires people to sustain him. He is the only truly self-sufficient being and as such is the only being that is all about giving rather than receiving.

Paul is making abundantly clear that this is not just another god in the pantheon of Greek gods. This is God above all other gods.

v26-28

26 And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, 27 that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, 28 for

“In him we live and move and have our being”;

as even some of your own poets have said,

“For we are indeed his offspring.”

And from God's nature, Paul turns to our nature. The Epicurean view was that man was just a bunch of material, a collection of atoms. But Paul makes clear that there is more to people than mere material. Fundamentally, our nature derives from our being a created being, created by God, in God's image. We're made by Him, all the nations exist because He has made them to exist, with the purpose of their existence that they should find their way to God.

Paul says that actually God is far nearer than we realise, and quotes Greek poets to back this up. Paul's first quote is from Epimenides, who Paul also quotes in Titus 1:12. We don't have the original poem from Epimenides, but we have fragments here and in other ancient writers, so we don't know the complete context of that phrase.

The next quote is from either Aratus or Cleanthes, both of whom lived around 300 BC. Aratus was from Tarsus, so maybe that's how Paul knows his poetry. In either case, the context of the phrase in the poetry is talking about how we are offspring of Zeus. But Paul takes these phrases, maybe they were well known at the time, and applies them to something new.

Paul is not afraid to find common ground, cultural references that help him to make his argument. But he uses this common ground to point towards the truth of things. He's quite content to challenge the cultural assumptions of the people he's talking to, and content to use their cultural assumptions to point out the truth as well.

And that truth is that God not only brought all people into being, but that we only continue to exist and live through His upholding hand. The truth that God has actually revealed Himself in part through the nature of things, general revelation. In the words of Psalm 19 (v1):

*The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.*

The Greeks actually know some of the truth of the matter - Paul will later write about this in Romans 1 - that all men know something of God, but they suppress the truth in their sin. Romans 1:18-23:

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. 19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So

they are without excuse. 21 For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools, 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

This is exactly what many of the Greeks do - they exchange the true God for idols, they settle for inanimate objects, as Paul continues to explain.

v29-31

29 Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. 30 The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Next, Paul explains that if it's true what he's said about the nature of God and the nature of man, then the idols in Athens are not the answer. The ultimate true God is not fashioned by any created material. God is above and beyond creation. He is self-existent. Psalm 90 (verse 2):

*Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting You are God.*

Then, telling a bunch of the top philosophers of the day that they were ignorant is not something you'll find in 'How to win friends and influence people'. Paul says that there have been times of ignorance that God overlooked - that is, that God takes into account the limitations of our knowledge. But nevertheless, we see that there is some knowledge of God that is revealed from nature itself - none can in the end plead total ignorance.

But now, Paul brings the heart of the message to the Areopagus. Ignorance is no longer any excuse. It's a message, as we've seen throughout Acts, calling for repentance and belief.

It's interesting here that Paul doesn't get as far as we might like. We want Paul to get to grace and salvation, but Luke records only as much as this - that God has appointed a day in which the world, that is, all people, will be judged in righteousness. They will be judged by one who God has appointed, and assurance of this man's appointment is given by raising Him from the dead.

Jesus' resurrection and ascension represent His coronation as the universal Lord of all who will return to judge the world according to righteousness. He is ruling and reigning from heaven as I speak, just as He was when Paul spoke.

There's obviously a lot more that should be said, and no doubt Paul said much more than is recorded here. Paul doesn't avoid the hard part - he does talk about judgement and he does treat repentance as a command. It's not an invite to get to know God, it's a command to repent. He's quite straightforward and doesn't cushion his words or water down the message. Maybe that's exactly what Paul's audience are receptive to, plain talking Athenian style. I think there's a lesson here for us too though - we shouldn't shy away from the hard bits of what we believe.

Both the Epicureans and the Stoics thought that man was essentially material, that man's essence is made of stuff - the soul, to the extent it existed, was a material thing, that perished at death. What Paul says about a man coming back from the dead, and a final judgement of all, was a direct affront to their philosophies. They wanted to hear something new, and they get it with both barrels.

v32-34

32 Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about this." 33 So Paul went out from their midst. 34 But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

Of course, many would mock what they considered to be nonsense. They didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead, or even of the possibility of life after death. Others were less mocking, but still didn't believe.

Though there were some that believed, including Dionysius the Areopagite. Being an Areopagite meant being part of this council that ruled Athens, so he's quite an important figure to convince.

God in His providence used Paul's words to call some to repentance and belief, but not all. The impact of Paul in the city might have been small. But the long term impact of Paul was great, the lasting influence of his words are visible in the fact that now the temples and altars of Athens lie in ruin, curiosities of antiquity. But Paul's speech to the Areopagus is engraved on a bronze plaque at the foot of the Areopagus hill.

Final Judgement

Paul's message is quite hard for many to hear. But it's very important for all to understand. There are consequences to what we believe about the nature of the world and ourselves.

A worldview without final judgement will be one that on the one hand encourages misbehaviour, as there are no consequences, and on the other hand encourages overzealous human attempts at justice, as this is the only chance we get to do justice. We see both of these at play today - we have on the one hand a world in which people are very Epicurean in their outlook - they seek pleasure, avoid pain and don't think there are eternal consequences for anything. On the other hand, we have a world in which we often seek justice for trifles, or for things we shouldn't. For example, our culture often seeks justice and recompense for long past injustices. All the people involved are dead and buried, but because justice wasn't done back then, our only hope is to do it now. Whereas we should believe that justice in the end will always be done - we don't need to punish people today for the sins of their ancestors, because in the end all will be judged perfectly.

But merely believing in the final day of judgement is not enough either. If we just believe in the final judgement, but nothing more, then we'll all try to justify ourselves. We'll set our standard of justice at such a level as to put us firmly on the right side of things and put others on the wrong side. You can probably go to any prison in the land and hear 'Oh, I'm not bad - not like the guy in the cell next door. Now he really did something unforgivable.' Of course the guy in the cell next door says the same thing. If we see clearly, then we realise that the final judgement is not to be looked forward to.

But Paul doesn't just talk about the final judgement - he makes clear that the judgement is going to be by one whom God has appointed. One whom has risen from the dead.

Understanding that God has appointed Christ to judge us turns the final judgement from a matter of despair to one of hope. We look forward to the day when we are found righteous and then get to be with Christ forever - counted righteous because our judge has given us His righteousness and taken away all our sins.

Conclusion

Idolatry is putting anything in the place that God should rightly occupy - even the atheistic philosophers had their idols - whether it was themselves and their pleasure or reason or status. Everyone puts something in pole position, then as well as today. What we put in first place is something we should be very careful about. Don't put something first if it can't bear it.

The gods of Athens made demands of their worshippers - there was always capacity to give a little more, to sacrifice something extra, to spend more time in worship. Whether an inanimate idol, or the god of self, there is never enough to satisfy that sort of god. They are needy, they take far more than they give back. They do nothing for us, but we have to work hard for them.

But Paul makes clear that the real God is one who gives, who fills. He doesn't need anything from us, doesn't need our works and worship and sacrifices. The real God, Jesus Christ, is one that gives Himself. This is the real difference between the true God and all other false gods - the true God is giving, overflowing, outpouring. He requires nothing of us, but gives us everything. He comes to earth to give Himself. This is the unknown God, made known.