

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Readings: Psalm 66:16-20

Acts 17:22-32

Psalm 66:16-20 (Good News translation)

¹⁶Come and listen, all who honour God,
and I will tell you what he has done for me.

¹⁷I cried to him for help;
I praised him with songs.

¹⁸If I had ignored my sins,
the Lord would not have listened to me.

¹⁹But God has indeed heard me;
he has listened to my prayer.

²⁰I praise God,
because he did not reject my prayer
or keep back his constant love from me.

Acts 17:22-33 (Good News Translation)

²² Paul stood up in front of the city council and said, “I see that in every way you Athenians are very religious. ²³ For as I walked through your city and looked at the places where you worship, I found an altar on which is written, ‘To an Unknown God.’ That which you worship, then, even though you do not know it, is what I now proclaim to you. ²⁴ God, who made the world and everything in it, is Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples made by human hands. ²⁵ Nor does he need anything that we can supply by working for him, since it is he himself who gives life and breath and everything else to everyone. ²⁶ From one human being he created all races of people and made them live throughout the whole earth. He himself fixed beforehand the exact times and the limits of the places where they would live. ²⁷ He did this so that they would look for him, and perhaps find him as they felt around for him. Yet God is actually not far from any one of us; ²⁸ as someone has said,

‘In him we live and move and exist.’
It is as some of your poets have said,
‘We too are his children.’

²⁹ Since we are God's children, we should not suppose that his nature is anything like an image of gold or silver or stone, shaped by human art and skill. ³⁰ God has overlooked the times when people did not know him, but now he commands all of them everywhere to turn away from their evil ways. ³¹ For he has fixed a day in which he will judge the whole world with justice by means of a man he has chosen. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising that man from death!”

Reflection:



This picture is of a painting by Raphael done in around 1515. It is his depiction of Paul speaking to the council at Areopagus, the speech of which is today's reading. The painting was the design for what was intended to be a tapestry to hang in the Sistine Chapel. You can see the painting at the V&A in London.

Let me begin by giving you a little background to Paul's visit to Athens. Paul, at this point in Luke's account, written in Acts of the Apostles, has already travelled over 1000 miles through Asia Minor with his fellow workers Silas and Timothy. He's just been in Thessalonica and Berea and now he's travelled the 300 miles from Berea to Athens because 'the Jews in Thessalonica heard that Paul had been preaching the word of God in Berea also, and came there and started exciting and stirring up the mob' (v.13) So Silas and Timothy had stayed in Berea teaching, and Paul, who was the centre of the Jews antagonism was escorted to Athens where he was to wait for Silas and Timothy. (v.15)

So Paul arrives in Athens to wait. His visit to the city is not on his organised schedule. He has already been in prison in Philippi, then chased out of Thessalonica and Berea. I don't know about you, but if I had been in his shoes I think I would have laid low, relaxed and recuperated a little. Perhaps I'd have done a little sightseeing. But Paul doesn't seem to know how to relax. He sets off to explore the city and discovers statues and temples and altars to 'idols'. Ancient Athens was considered to be the centre of the cultural world at the time. even today names like Socrates, Aristotle and Plato are familiar to us, and they were proud of their learning and debate. In an attempt to appease all their gods they had created altars at which sacrifices would be made to placate them in the hope of assuring the people's well being. They were so worried that there might be a god they didn't know about, and thereby might be angering, that they created an altar to 'An Unknown god' so that they didn't unwittingly annoy it. You can imagine how Paul must have felt coming in to what, to him, would be a completely pagan environment. v16 tells us that 'he was greatly upset when he noticed how full of idols the city was.' Again, I wonder if we had been there what we would have done? Personally, I think I might have kept quiet, not wanted to stir things up. If I was in a foreign city, on my own - would I have argued? I'm not sure I would. In fact, having visited non Christian countries myself, I know I would have kept a low profile. But then, I'm not Paul!

So Paul debates with the citizens of the city both in the synagogue and the market place, going to all the places that people will be gathered. He also debated with the philosophers of the time: the Epicureans and Stoics. Eventually word of his preaching about Jesus and His resurrection brings him before the city council, the Aereopagus, who ask him to explain what he is up to.

If you visit Athens today, many of the temples and buildings of Paul's time are still there to visit, the majestic Parthenon being the most famous. The Aereopagus where the council met is still evident. Known today also as Mars Hill it looks towards the Parthenon on its' high position.



Parthenon from Areopagus



Steps up to Areopagus

It is from this place that Paul preaches the sermon which is today's reading. Interestingly if you look at the above photo you will see that there is a plaque on the right. This is that same sermon written out in Greek:



Paul stands in front of the council, the Areopagus, and it is a great lesson in speech giving - he starts by engaging the listener with something they can relate to - firstly he compliments them on their intellect, he certainly doesn't talk down to them. He tells them he has seen their altar to 'An Unknown God' which creates the way in to explain the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to them. There is a god that they don't know about. He isn't just any god though - He is The God. The God who created the universe. The God who doesn't live in temples. And the one big difference between their gods and The God, is that God doesn't require us to do anything for Him. He has come down to earth and met with us. He has done all that is needed to restore our right relationship with Him. And He has done it through the life, death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. He gives it to them straight - he preaches a gospel that is unapologetic and fearless. He finishes by telling them that 'God will judge the whole world with justice by means of a man he has chosen. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising that man from death!' (v31).

Paul, as we know from other speeches in the bible and from his letters, is a man of eloquence, quite used to speaking at length. He's the same Paul who, when preaching to friends, went on and on past midnight so that someone fell out of the window asleep (20:7-12) Here he's just been given the chance to speak to the highest forum in the Greek world, and yet, even speaking slowly, it only takes 2 minutes to read these verses in the

Greek. I think we can assume, therefore, that this speech is a summary of what Paul actually said. Luke has telescoped things together, but even so we can tell this is a highly skilled performance. Paul takes on the educated elite of the day, and preaches the gospel faithfully and uncompromisingly. Having preached that message, he leaves it to God to open the eyes, ears and hearts of those who are listening.

If we read on we discover the responses people made: v32 -34 tell us that some made fun of him, some said they wanted to hear him speak again on the subject, and some joined him and believed.

So what can we learn from this wonderful account of Paul in Athens? Well, firstly, I think we need to decide which God we are following. During these current difficult times, where are we placing our trust and hope? Do we trust and follow Jesus, knowing that He is the only one that gives us true hope for the future. Whatever happens He will be with us, through the difficult times and the good, and we can look forward to our eternal future with Him.

The Athenians created a whole collection of gods and idols, but they were all man-made, lived in temples built by humans. Our God is too big for buildings, He can't be contained in one place. The whole earth breathes and has its' being because of Him.

The defining difference between the man-made idols and The True God is that **God Loves Us**. That's it. That's the whole message. God Loves Us, all of us, everyone, everywhere, whether we acknowledge Him or not. He loves us so much that He allowed His Son to die, taking on His shoulders all the sins we would ever commit, so that we could once again enjoy a relationship with God.

Paul never took a break. Everywhere he went he preached the Good News of the Gospel of Christ. Where did he do it? - Where the people were. In the synagogue, in the market place, wherever he could find them.

Once we can get out and about again - I wonder where our market place will be? Where can we go to tell people the Good News? Or to put it another way - where can we go to gossip the gospel? The churches are discovering at the moment that there is a busy market place on-line. People are flocking to listen to sermons, reflections, lectures and thoughts on the Christian faith - people who wouldn't even think of stepping across the threshold of a church on a Sunday morning. I wonder if that will continue, or will we need to move and create a new market place elsewhere as well?

Life in 2020 is certainly not turning out as we perhaps planned at the turn of the year. But I trust and pray that when we return to some sort of normality that these new exciting market places will continue. I pray also that each one of us discovers our own market place, wherever it may be, where, with the strength of the Holy Spirit within us, we can go and together 'gossip the gospel'. Amen

Prayer: *(by Nick Fawcett)*

Gracious God,
there are times when we find ourselves
in the wilderness of doubt and despair.
We look at our lives,
at the world,
at the invasion of coronavirus,
and we are overwhelmed by a sense of hopelessness,
by questions as to why you do not act to establish your kingdom
or respond to us in our time of need.
Help us at such moments, when all seems dark,
to once again put our faith in you,
trusting that your light will finally shine again.
Inspire us with the knowledge that, time and again,
it has been in the wilderness experiences of people's lives
that you have been supremely at work -
challenging, deepening, and strengthening their faith,
equipping them for new avenues of service,
and opening the way to a richer experience of your love.
Do the same with us now we pray.
Lead us forward with the power of your Holy Spirit,
through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen

Music: Ten thousand reasons Matt Redman

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DXDGE_IRIOE