

FROM FEAR TO WITNESS

STUDY FIVE—SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER YEAR A

Acts 17.22-31

²² Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³For 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. ²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶From one ancestor* he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring.”

²⁹Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. ³⁰While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.’

This week’s reading moves us on in the story from the very earliest days of the church’s mission under the Spirit to a much later time. Paul is now not a persecutor but a leading preacher and apostle. The city is not Jerusalem but Athens. The church is no longer made up of Jewish Christians but is multicultural, with all the problems that would bring. More than 20 years after Stephen’s death everything has changed.

The passage we read today has no context so I have included Acts 17.16-21 to help us as we approach this looking for some insights into mission and spirituality.

Acts 17.16-21

¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the market-place* every day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, ‘What does this babbling want to say?’ Others said, ‘He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.’ (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) ¹⁹So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, ‘May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?’ ²⁰It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.’ ²¹Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

Paul is encountering cultured paganism of his day in his time in Athens and it is instructive for us to see how he does it. Paul has stirred up trouble in Thessalonica and they in turn

have stirred further trouble in Beroea. Paul has taken advice and to Athens to wait for Timothy and Silas who are cleaning up in Beroea and establishing the new congregation.

Paul sets out to do his business as an apostle and talks to people. He is not averse to public, no doubt robust, debate. He starts in the synagogue first because in the early church the mission went to the Jew first, as God's ancient people. Then he moves between sabbaths to the market place. The Gospel is best argued and tested in public spaces, as far as he is concerned. Anyone who wanted to engage was welcome.

Paul is in the city of ancient intellectual elites. Athens had once been the centre of the ancient intellectual life but it was now in a period of decline. It was a free city and had a famous university but it was probably best described as living on its reputation. Paul found himself irritated by the city's strange mix of idolatry and superstition and intellectual debate. That is not uncommon in our day.

In the market place he met with two potent philosophical forces of the time; Epicureanism and Stoicism. What makes this so interesting is that they are both still with us. Epicureanism took its name from its founder Epicurus (341-270 BCE) and tended to be materialistic in outlook. They believed that either the gods did not exist, or they were so far removed from the world and remote from its concerns that they had no interest in it and exercised no influence. They taught a rudimentary atomic theory, and their ethics emphasised the importance of pleasure and tranquillity. They were not sensualists as they are often portrayed today. Their view of pleasure scorned sensualism.

Zeno (340-265 BCE) founded Stoicism, the name coming from the place where he taught. Reason was the first principle and it was inherent in the structuring of the universe. That was an expression of their view that God and the universe were one as an expression of Gods' nature as world-soul.

These folk dismissed Paul as a babbler, or seed-picker, describing a bird picking up bits and pieces from here and there, a purveyor of mere scraps of learning. It was a robust debate. They took him to be peddling foreign deities (anything from Palestine and the East was definitely foreign). They thought Paul was peddling Jesus and his consort 'resurrection' which in Greek is feminine, and today is Anastasia. Understandable.

That opens up the public debate even further. At this point our reading begins. Paul presents himself before the scholars (who could also act as judges) and puts his case. He not on trial, but his ideas do trouble the status quo.

Inn the speech Paul puts three standard Christian ideas out for a hearing and perhaps a debate. Remember this speech is a summary so Luke has put his stamp on it as ancient historians did, to emphasise what they considered to be the main points.

He begins with an attention-grabbing gambit. He finds them very religious. In fact, so much so that just in case there is the altar to the unknown God. It is just the fact that gives him the move he needs.

First, it leads him to the God who made the world, the Lord of heaven and earth. A standard Jewish claim, and the first article of the creed. That means God is not trapped in shrines nor in need of human assistance or supply. He is the source of life.

Second, Human beings are God's because of their creation. It is what binds them together. They need God because their life comes from him and is dependent on him and living is for

searching God out. God is always searching them out. Paul then gives the essence of the thoughts of a couple of the poets to back up his thesis. The sources are hard to ascertain with precision.

Third on the basis that humans are God's offspring Paul draws the conclusion that idolatry is a fruitless exercise. If humans are like God, then it is clear that an inanimate object cannot portray the living God.

Paul then becomes the preacher and calls attention to the fact that, if what he says is true, then there are consequences to such a truth. Ignorance in the past may be overlooked but to ignore the truth is bordering on dangerous. God's judgement, the resurrection of Jesus call people to have a complete change of heart and framework of thinking. And seeing the world.

So what do we make of all this?

This is not a one-size-fits-all pattern for mission. Very few are as well-trained and equipped as Paul. We are not full-time mission workers. We live and work to care for our families and live our lives. It would be very unwise to view this story as setting us a standard to which we must conform. The call to us is more like: we live in a situation not unlike this, where even some variation of the same old philosophies haunt the corridors of intellectual life and shape our cultural life. We can't be Paul and shouldn't be, but we might pick up few ideas to toss around. That might help us.

First, know what is going on around us. What ideas drive our society and its desires, and what rituals do we use to support and reinforce such ideas because that is what drives us and our neighbours. We do not to have all the answers but we need to be in the ballpark with the other players and understand the rules by which the game is being played now.

Second, know basic Christian theology and have confidence in it. Did Jesus rise from the dead and now is Lord of the cosmos? A crazy idea, I know, but central to Christian proclamation and work. If we don't have confidence in that then give the whole thing a miss, and walk away. As Paul says on this subject, "we are of all people most to be pitied." The epicureans and stoics are most likely right.

Third, prepare ourselves for honest and public debate. It won't always be successful, just as Paul only had moderate success, but a church came into being and some people wanted to continue the dialogue.

Fourth, take courage, as Paul did, that human beings are God's offspring and that their desires to find meaning, happiness, and security are part of a long human search that God encourages and inspires.

Question

Can you spot some more ideas that might be helpful in our conduct of our calling in our world?

1 Peter 3.8-22

⁸ Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. ⁹Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing. ¹⁰For

'Those who desire life

and desire to see good days,
 let them keep their tongues from evil
 and their lips from speaking deceit;
¹¹ let them turn away from evil and do good;
 let them seek peace and pursue it.
¹² For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
 and his ears are open to their prayer.
 But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.'

¹³ Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? ¹⁴But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear,* and do not be intimidated, ¹⁵but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; ¹⁶yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. ¹⁷For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. ¹⁸For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, ²⁰who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water. ²¹And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²²who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

As we have seen already in the letter, Peter conceives the practical life of Christians as relational, just the life with God is relational. Christian ethics is more about how Christians conceive their agency in relationships and live out their lives as servants of the crucified one. We discussed that in the last study at some length. Our lives are not so much about ticking off a code as learning how to treat the other as the crucified Christ would. It is a journey in which we learn to take back and reshape our agency under the gentle tutelage of the Jesus and the Spirit. It is a lifelong journey.

He now concerns himself with the relational life of the congregation in verses 8-12. Carefully read these verses and pray with them. They are his summary of congregational life under the cross. Verses 10-12 quote Psalm 34:13-17 to demonstrate that this has always been God's way.

The virtues of verse eight are all relational and common across the New Testament writings. They are not just commands to do something but descriptions of how congregations are shaped and formed. Perhaps the notion of a humble mind needs some definition as it will enhance all the other virtues. John Dickson gives a definition that I have found helpful,

Humility is the noble choice to forgo your status, deploy your resources or use your influence for the good of others before yourself. He adds, more simply a humble person is marked by a *willingness to hold power in the service of others.*

That results in a non-retaliatory relationship with others. All we wish to give is blessing.

Note

This study and the last will, no doubt, have raised questions for some in its recommendation of non-retaliation in the face of evil. I have discussed the meaning of the texts but now we must face the fact that some Christians who have been the victims of abuse and oppression have found themselves further oppressed by being told to submit to their abuse. And the oppressor has played on that piety. It is easy for those of us who are relatively powerful in society to exhort the poor and powerless to non-retaliation.

I want to draw a distinction between non-retaliation and non-resistance. Think Christ, think Ghandhi, think Martin Luther King Jr. All of them showed risky, active, faith. Christians must actively resist evil in the form of violence and oppression given the tools available to us in democratic societies.

That is why Peter wants congregations to be safe spaces. They would be havens for slaves, women and wives. In the ancient world Roman society dictated that all slaves and women follow the religious allegiance of the head of household. Peter urges non-retaliation, but not non-resistance. The channels for resistance for our long-departed ancestors were few, if any at all. Their resistance was to take their agency back. And, by the way, that is still the first necessary step today. We can back that up with help from social and legal agencies. They could not. The crucified Christ and the resurrection were all they had. And the congregation which was sympathetic, loving, tender hearted, and of a humble mind.

Without doubt this requires more dialogue but that should be part of our ongoing missional discussion.

In verses 13-17 Peter continues to discuss the issue of suffering unjustly. Christian's resistance is doing good, living in a way that seeks to put things to rights. In a just society that should be welcome but often it is not. Nasty things can happen to good people.

So, Peter says be prepared to resist in another way. Be ready to explain why you do what you in the name of the one who was crucified. It requires us to be very clear about our hope, and be able to explain it. Also be able to explain how that connects to your behaviour. We are not secularists who think that we alone can perfect the world.

But that explanation must be based on a clear conscience and done in gentleness and respect. The crucified Christ must impact our whole life, not just our intellect. Intellect without conscience, gentleness and respect is barren, naked power.

Once again Peter returns to Christ's death to explore suffering for doing good. He gives us passage that is so full of obscurity (for us, so long after) it is hard to know what to make of it. And the scholarship is immense.

So, just a couple of comments. The main theme is the triumph of Easter. That triumph extends even to those who tried to overcome Noah and thus destroy the world and who are now 'in prison'. Christ's preaching his victory over them means that the salvation he offers cannot be overturned. The world will be saved, despite their efforts. Christ's victory over them raises the flag of victory over those who persecute those pursue Christ's love in the world.

That is about the best I can do in this space. Verse 22 is the key conclusion and it is common in the New Testament. Christ rules and the whole of creation is subject to him. That remains the core of mission theology and the spiritual life of the church.

Question

How can we work towards a spirituality that would help us take back and reshape our agency under the cross, for the good of all?

What can a functioning congregational life, as described by Peter, contribute to our mission?

How important is congregation as 'safe space' for mission?

John 14.15-21

¹⁵ 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. ¹⁷This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

¹⁸ 'I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.'

We continue our short journey through Jesus' last night with his disciples. Last week we noted the consternation of the disciples about the 'way' Jesus was going and where it would lead him and them. There were strong hints that his departure was for good. That issue is addressed in today's reading.

The theme of Jesus' departure remains central to this passage. This departure will not lead to lostness but a new experience; the gift of the Spirit.

The Spirit is called the Paraclete and that is a word that is loaded with connotations. One prominent use is that of an advocate or a defending counsel. At root the word, in its verbal form, signifies 'to call alongside (to help)'. The noun then acquires a range of meanings from "helper", 'intercessor', 'comforter' or 'one who appears on another's behalf'. These are all plays on its fundamental idea. We can use what we need depending on the context.

The passage begins and ends with the disciples love of Jesus, the father's love of Jesus and the disciples through him and the disciples love of each other which, as is indicated in John 13.34-35, is the content of the disciples' obedience. It is, in the very act of such obedience, a sign of trust and hope.

The Spirit comes to us in our endeavour of living out our love of Jesus and the love of God for the world in Jesus. Love is not a romantic notion, as we have seen in our journey, but a turning upside down of all our understandings of relationships so they take on the suffering and joy of the cross. The Spirit, who shares in the secrets of the love between the Father and the Son now comes to the disciples forever. Jesus for a few years; the Spirit forever. The Spirit is the 'new' helper but one they know already because they have been with Jesus, who himself is the source of the water of life that the Spirit brings (John 7.37-39).

Just as Jesus is the Truth so the Spirit is Truth. Truth is not abstract to be debated forever by those interested, but found in the person of Jesus who reveals the love of the Father. That truth now abides in and among the disciples. It is the basis of their being and calling. The Spirit communicates the truth of the ongoing revelation of the love of God in Jesus.

Just as Jesus has experienced rejection so too will the revelation of the Spirit. It cannot see him and therefore, on its logic, it cannot know him. This world, already rejecting the claims of Jesus by rejecting his origins from the father, will still cling to the deceit that it can control its own destiny. The Spirit is the helper with the disciples caught in the divide.

Jesus' physical departure will not be the end of his revealing presence. He will come in the Spirit and there they will find life. It is on the day of the Spirit that they will know their place in the Father, because they are in Jesus, and Jesus dwells in them. There they will find life.

You will have noticed how deeply personal and relational all this discussion is. It is not dry doctrine but a living experience of life in God. And, not just for a chosen few but all disciples. It won't be without its suffering and conflict but it will be full of God's life. We are not in some outer circle of being but wrapped in the very life of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This is the substance of our mission; to become the revealing presence of God's love for the world in the Son to the world around, us just as Jesus did. It is also the grounds of our spirituality; relational, personal, grounded in love and bringing to the world rivers of living water.

Question

John's Gospel has shaped Christian spirituality and mission for thousands of years. Take stock of the little we have read so far and reflect on how it might shape us in our context.

I am going to quote from a famous work called *The Go-Between God* by John Taylor;

"The chief actor in the historic mission of the Christian church is the Holy Spirit. He is the director of the whole enterprise. The mission consists of the things he is doing in the whole world. In a special way it consists of the light he is focussing on Jesus Christ.

This fact, so patent to Christians in the first century, is largely forgotten in our own. So we have lost our nerve and our sense of direction and have turned the divine initiative into a human enterprise." (p.3)

Bishop Taylor wrote this in 1972. What has changed, if anything? What do you make of the assertion?

BIG QUESTION; RELIGIONS

We have intellectual and spiritual baggage in this arena so we must tread carefully but, tread we must. We live a world full of religions, and ideas about what makes meaning and purpose, and at a time when some religions and ideologies, fracture under societal changes. None of this is alien to us in a multicultural society. The questions will accompany us on the way.

BIG QUESTION; SCIENCE

I left school at 15 and, when I finally matriculated to university, I studied science. One of the first theological books I read was one on Christianity and science that opened me to the

discussion. I became interested in the history of science and religion, and the impacts of science on issues of meaning and purpose. That science has disproved religion is a common populist theme. Those who read in the history and philosophy of science know that is a hotly debated area and, in history especially, full of myths and legends. It is also an area of fruitful dialogue. In our society, if we wish to make sense of our mission we cannot avoid engaging this dialogue.

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