

Sixth Sunday of Easter (A)
Acts 17.22-31/Psalm 66/I Peter 3.13-22/John 14.15-31
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
27 April 2008

God Lives Where?

~Paul H. Friesen~

I have a few questions to help us enter into the mood of one of our readings this morning.

Have you ever found yourself trying to explain something really important to you to someone who seems almost completely unable to understand you? Have you ever found yourself in a conversation about God and faith with someone who almost completely lacks your experiences, and even lacks the words you use about religion?

This is the situation the Apostle Paul found himself while visiting Athens, as we have just heard in the reading from the *Acts of the Apostles*.

We have actually heard pieces of a number of apostolic sermons, from the *Acts of the Apostles*, in these weeks between Easter and Pentecost, the New Testament book which tells the story of the growth of the earliest Christian communities.

These sermons were all addressed to the Apostles' fellow Jews—to rabbis, scholars, synagogue leaders and ordinary worshippers of the Lord as revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures. The early Christians talked constantly about their 'resurrection faith', about how the resurrection of Jesus was the turning point in their faith and in world history.

The discussions between the early Christian Apostles and their first audiences began with shared commitments.

They had a shared commitment to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, a shared commitment to the same Scriptures, a confidence in the Creator of the Universe, who still acts within human history. And they had a shared belief that God loved his people with a divine love that upheld that the universe, and had a shared desire to live differently—to love God and neighbour in response to this great God they called the Lord.

But now, in today's reading, Paul, the most famous of the Apostles, finds himself in a different religious universe, in the ancient city of Athens. He arrived there, really, by accident. We hear of no synagogues to which he had planned to go.¹

¹ Paul's time in Athens is helpfully described in Ben Witherington's *The Acts of the Apostle: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p.511-535.

In fact, in the first part of the seventeenth chapter of the book of *Acts*, the previous situation is described to us. We hear that religious mobs, stirred up after Paul's debates with his fellow Jews, have just rioted in Thessalonica. Then, it seems, the mobs attempted to lynch Paul not only in Thessalonica but also in another city, Beroea, to which Paul and his companions had next fled.

Paul's companions Timothy and Silas quickly decided to stay behind to nurture a very young Christian community in Beroea, but everyone agreed that Paul should be hustled off to a safe place immediately. And Athens was just the place, they figured.

Paul was probably told by his friends to let things cool down, to stay away from any synagogues in Athens. He didn't, we hear in this chapter, but rather 'argued in the synagogue'. But newer, bigger things immediately captured his mind and his passions, and we hear no more about the synagogues in Athens after this.

Instead Paul's attention was riveted by the paganism of one of the greatest of the cities of ancient civilization. Almost everyone he met knew nothing of the Jewish faith in which the Apostle Paul had been raised.

Athenians were however quite familiar with the stories of the Greek and Roman gods, and some claimed to represent the greatest of the ancient Greek philosophies. The Apostle Paul was at first intrigued by this paganism, and at a loss as to how to think about it. But then he quickly recovered —and once again launched into a series of public speeches.

The speech that has come down to us may just help us express our own faith in our own voice, when we find ourselves this week talking with people to whom our religious beliefs and experiences seem to come from another universe.

To help us make sense of today's story, this is what I'm going to try. *First*, I would like to sum up the events in Athens that led up to Paul's speech. *Second*, I'm going to attempt to give Paul's speech, paraphrasing it, filling in the bits from Paul's own faith that we can assume, but were left out, at least in the very short version it has come down to us. *And finally*, I want to reflect for a minute or two about what happened after Paul's speech, and what it might mean for us. And I hope it won't take nearly as long as it all sounds!

In *Acts* 17.16-21, the verses leading up to the speech that has been read to us, we are dropped into the swirl of ideas on the streets of Athens.

The first thing we hear is that Paul is ‘distressed’—deeply disturbed that the streets of the city are lined with shrines and temples in which statues of the gods and goddesses sit. It is almost as if these statues are waiting for religious Athenians to stop on their way to work or the way to the market, to burn a little incense and say a little prayer to this or that god for fertility, or for personal safety, or for success at work, or for a hundred other little things. Paul held by his roots, and despised this idolatry like all the Hebrew prophets did.

Now Paul knew that Athenians didn’t actually worship stone idols, but the gods or spiritual forces they represented, yet he was still distressed. He knew that there were philosophers in the city and popular teachers who tried to raise the minds of the people beyond selfish lists of prayers to unreliable gods and goddesses. But Paul was still distressed. So he began to talk about Jesus, and the meaning of Jesus’ resurrection.

And the most important thing about these introductory verses is that we hear Paul was a spectacular failure. Let me quote verse 18: ‘Some...debated with him. Some said, “What does this babbler want to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.” [And, the author adds these words:] ‘(This was because Paul was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.)’

In other words, Paul was so unsuccessful that some compared him to a ‘babbling’—someone who stuck together bits of disconnected ideas and passed them off as profound. And Paul was so unsuccessful that some thought that he was trying to introduce two new gods into the already crowded religion of Athens—Jesus and Anastasia. Anastasia? It seems the crowd had mistaken the word Paul was using for ‘resurrection’ for the name of a female deity who they thought was the companion to this mysterious Jesus. It was all a mess. And so Paul ends up standing in front of the Areopagus, the religious council of the city responsible for any official changes to the complicated collection of beliefs already in place in Athens.

And then Paul tries again, speaking to the religious council and anyone who would hear, in a speech that went something like this:

My friends, Athenians, citizens of this ancient and honourable city, I am quite impressed with the breadth of your religious belief. You have left nothing out when it comes to religious worship.

As I, a pilgrim, a citizen of another great city, passed through your city, studying your temples and shrines I even came to an altar dedicated to ‘An Unknown God’. I can honestly say I have never been to a city so thorough in making provision for every possible religious belief. So, with

your permission, I would like to introduce to you the God you have left out.

This God may be unknown to you, but he is in fact known, and can be known by you.

I'm speaking now about the God who made the entire universe, the Lord of all that is. He constructed everything we can see, and we live in his world, so it's a bit foolish of us to build temples and shrines and expect this God to live in them. After all, God made our hands and everything we could use to build a house for him.

My own noble ancestor, King David of Israel, was not even allowed to build a temple for this God—when he tried, God said: 'When did I ever ask to have a house of cedar to build for me?—rather, I will build your descendants into a royal house to bless the world.'²This is the problem with temples: it suggests God needs us to build him a home, when in fact the Creator of the universe has built this world to be our home.

And God has done more than this! He has filled the world with his people who all share a common ancestor, and has overseen the rising and falling of empires and nations, and the times and meaning of individual lives—their beginning, and their end. This is so that everyone, within their own limits would search for the one true God, who is not so unknown as you think.

This God is much closer at hand than down the street, inside a shrine. This God made us in his own image—that is why if we search for him with open eyes we will find him right beside us.

Haven't your venerable poets said the same thing: 'In him we live and move and have our being?' Haven't they also said: 'We too are God's offspring.'

Why then is any of us messing about with shrines and statues and speculations? Why worry about the exercise of our limited imaginations. Gold and silver and stone are fine things to carve and fashion, but they represent God far less than we ourselves, whom God fashioned.

So let's look inward, and see God's imprint upon us and turn outward to worship the God who no race or religion has captured in buildings or even in concepts. The hour is at hand because this God sent has sent Jesus to lead us back to God. This God raised the same Jesus from the dead, shattering death and sin and breaking through all that we do to each other, and promising us a new world.

This God asks us to repent, to stop thrashing around in our pain and sin, and to turn to our maker and live, and live forever. This God is not

² See *II Samuel* 7.1-13.

unknown. This God does not need to be talked into existence. This is the God to worship. And if we do, it will change us. This God will build us into the church, which he has already begun.

So, what happened after Paul's speech?

The book of *Acts* is brief: some scoffed, some said they would hear him again (perhaps only out of politeness) and some were in fact formed—build—into a church in Athens. And we know that at least one member of this new church was a member of the religious council (Dionysius the Areopagite) and one was a citizen of influence in the city (a woman named Damaris).

We know now that Paul's desperate attempt to communicate the Gospel eventually succeeded beyond his wildest imagination—that Athens and Greece became leading intellectual centres of Christianity and a Christian civilization.

But what do we think about the present, about this afternoon?

We live in a world more and more like ancient Athens. We can't assume our fellow citizens know the basics of Scripture or the Christian story. The media often mix things up.

But if we are confident that the God we worship is the maker of the universe, and that Jesus Christ's resurrection has changed the world, we stand with the Apostle Paul.

We can break through our distress and our weaknesses, like Paul did. We can hear and honour all religious journeys, like Paul did. And we can communicate, each one of us, like Paul did, in some way, the story of the God who built the world and is building the church.

It all gets down to the good news of the resurrection, which we celebrate this morning—to God giving birth to a new community. It all gets down to letting God change us and our plans, rather than trying to fit God into our concepts, our programmes or our buildings.

And so we have this wonderful opportunity to take up right now: to celebrate God's wonderful good news in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, with words and with bread and with wine. It is in celebrating this that we will know our own spiritual story, and find our way to communicate with those who only seem to come from another world, another universe.

Amen.

