

## Athens: Spirit of 2012?

Acts 17:16-34

There is something enthralling about Paul in Athens, the great Christian Apostle amid the glories of ancient Greece. Of course he had known about Athens since his boyhood.

Everybody knew about Athens, the foremost Greek city-state since the Fifth century BC, incorporated into the Roman Empire, yet retaining its freedom and intellectual independence. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, literature and art, human liberty: it lived on its past and although relatively small still had an unrivalled reputation as the empire's intellectual metropolis.

Now Paul visits for the first time seemingly only enroute and waiting for Silas & Timothy to catch up before a return to the Macedonia that had called him. Meanwhile as he waited alone in this cultural capital of the world the Holy Spirit stirs him to react: this is the story of his reaction and poses the challenge of how as believers we should react to cities dominated by non Christian ideology or religion, a city which may be aesthetically magnificent and culturally sophisticated, but morally decadent and spiritually deceived or dead? There are four parts to his reaction: Luke tells us what he saw, felt, did and said & I believe we can learn much from his reaction which would serve us well today in Canterbury.

What Paul saw: He was no uncultured philistine: he was a graduate of the universities of Tarsus and Jerusalem and God had endowed him with a massive intellect. He might have been spellbound by the sheer splendour of the city's architecture, history and wisdom but first and foremost what he saw was neither the beauty nor the brilliance of the city but its idolatry. The Greek adjective *kateidolos* is unique and not found anywhere else: 'full of idols' doesn't quite capture it: smothered or swamped or a veritable forest of idols does.

There is no need to suppose that Paul was blind to their beauty but beauty did not impress him if it did not honour God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Instead, he was oppressed by the idolatrous use to which the God-given artistic creativity of the Athenians was being put. This was what Paul saw: a city submerged in idols.

What Paul felt: He was greatly distressed. The Greek means to irritate, provoke, rouse to anger: the same word being used in 1 Corinthians 13 where Paul describes love as 'not easily angered'. So did Paul then not practise in Athens what he preached in Corinth? Was he roused to sinful anger by the city's idolatry? (Moffatt 'irritated' JBP 'exasperated'). No I think not: the verb is continuous which expresses not a sudden loss of temper but rather a continuous settled reaction to what Paul saw. Further comparisons with uses of the same Greek word in the Greek version of the OT lead us to a different conclusion: that the pain he felt was due neither to bad temper, not to pity for the Athenians' ignorance, nor even to fear for their eternal salvation. It was due rather to his abhorrence of idolatry, which aroused within him deep stirrings of jealousy for the name of God, as he saw human beings so depraved as to be giving to idols the honour and glory which were due to the one living and true God alone: JBP 'His whole soul was revolted at the sight of a city given over to idolatry'.

Moreover this inward pain and horror, which moved Paul to share the good news with the idolaters of Athens, should similarly move us. Incentives are important in every sphere. Being rational human beings we need to know not only what we should be doing, but why we should be doing it. And our motivation for mission is specially important, not least in our day in which the comparative study of religions has led many to deny finality and uniqueness to Jesus Christ and to reject

the very concept of evangelising and converting people. How then, in the face of growing opposition to it, can Christians justify the continuance of world evangelisation? The commonest answer is to point to the great commission, and indeed obedience to it provides a strong stimulus. Compassion is higher than obedience, however, namely love for people who do not know Jesus Christ, and who on that account are alienated, disorientated, and indeed lost. But I think that the highest incentive of all is zeal or jealousy for the glory of Jesus Christ. God has promoted him to the supreme place of honour, in order that every knee shall bow and every tongue should acknowledge His Lordship. Whenever He is denied His rightful place in people's lives, therefore, we should feel inwardly wounded and jealous for His name.

What Paul did: Firstly (as was his custom) he spoke at the Synagogue, secondly he spoke in the Agora (the market place) and thirdly he reasoned with the philosophers. He was able, with the Spirit's help to speak with equal confidence to religious people, casual passers by and sophisticated philosophers. Today there is still an important place for sharing the gospel with church goers, and then seekers on the fringe of church life: there is also a need for gifted evangelists who can make friends and gossip the gospel in informal settings like the shopping centre, pub or café. As for the so called sophisticated neither church or street evangelism is appropriate: instead we need home evangelism with free discussion of the Alpha kind, and groups like 'Agnostics Anonymous' in which no holds are barred, and also lecture evangelism with a strong apologetic content. We need today more Christian thinkers who will dedicate their minds to Christ as journalists, lecturers, authors, dramatists and broadcasters, TV script writers, producers and personalities, artists and actors who use a variety of art forms to

communicate the gospel. All these can do battle with non-Christian philosophies and ideologies in a way that resonates with thoughtful, modern men and women, and so at least gain a hearing through the reasonableness of their presentation. Christ calls human beings to humble, but not to stifle, their intellect.

What Paul said: Paul's evangelistic dialogue with these groups may have continued for many days but it led to one of the greatest opportunities of his whole ministry, the presentation of the gospel to the world-famous, supreme council of Athens, the Areopagus. Paul starts where they are: I see that you are very religious! As I walked around your objects of worship I even found an altar with this inscription: to an Unknown God (picture). Now what you worship as unknown I am going to proclaim to you! He then went on to proclaim the living and true God in five ways:

1. God is the creator of the universe (v24)
2. God is the sustainer of life (v25)
3. God is the ruler of all the Nations (v26-28a): *in Him we live and move and have our being!*
4. God is the Father of human beings (v28b-29): *we are Gods offspring.*

In essence Paul is saying that all idolatry, whether ancient or modern, primitive or sophisticated, is inexcusable, whether the images are metal or mental, material objects of worship or unworthy concepts in the mind. For idolatry is an attempt either to localise God, confining Him within limits which we impose, whereas He is creator of the Universe; or to domesticate God, making Him dependant on us, taming and trapping Him, whereas he is the sustainer of human life; or to alienate God, blaming him for his distance and silence, whereas He is Ruler of the Nations, and not far from any of us; or to dethrone God, demoting him to some image of our

own contrivance or craft, whereas he is our Father from whom we derive our being. In brief, all idolatry tries to minimize the gulf between the Creator and his creatures, in order to bring Him under our control. More than that, it actually reverses the respective positions of God and us, so that, instead of our humble acknowledging that God has created and rules us, we presume to imagine that we can create and rule God. There is no logic in idolatry; it is a perverse, topsy-turvy expression of our human rebellion against God. And it leads to Paul's last point.

5. God is the Judge of the World (v30/31).

How Paul challenges us:

Paul's message is comprehensive: he proclaims God in his fullness as Creator, Sustainer, Ruler, Father & Judge. He takes in the whole of nature and of history, reviews time from creation to consummation, emphasizes the greatness of God, not only as the beginning and the end of all things, but as the one to whom we owe our being and to whom we must give account. He argued that human beings already know these things by natural or general revelation, and that their ignorance and idolatry are inexcusable. So he called on them with great solemnity, before it was too late, to repent. Many people are rejecting our gospel today not because they perceive it to be false, but because they perceive it to be trivial. People are looking for an integrated world view which makes sense of all their experience. We learn from Paul that we cannot preach the gospel of Jesus without the doctrine of God, or the cross without the creation, or salvation without judgment. Today's world needs a bigger gospel, the full gospel of Scripture what Paul later in Ephesus was to call 'the whole purpose of God' (20:27).

Idols are not limited to primitive societies; there are many sophisticated idols too. An idol is a god-substitute. Any

person or thing that occupies the place which God should occupy is an idol. Covetousness is idolatry. Ideologies can be idolatries. So can fame, wealth and power, sex, food, alcohol and other drugs, parents, spouse, children and friends, work, recreation, television and possessions, even church, religion and Christian service,. Idols always seem particularly dominant in cities. Jesus wept over the impenitent city of Jerusalem. Paul was deeply pained by the idolatrous city of Athens. Have we ever been provoked by the idolatrous cities of the contemporary world? Have we ever wept over the rebellion and idolatry of Canterbury? Dare I say it but until we are provoked and weep then the cause of Christ will not advance.

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