

SERMON Sunday 10th May ~ Hope into Action

Acts 17:22-31 and Matthew 25: 34-40

I love the passage in Acts where we see how the apostle Paul introduces the people of Athens to the good news of Jesus Christ by first finding out where they are spiritually and then building on the religious foundations they already have.

It is an example to *us* to be willing to find out where people are *spiritually placed* before we disregard their faith. Last Sunday at the 8am service I spoke about the importance of *'looking for where God is in a situation, not where he isn't'* and this is what I think Paul does. Instead of seeing their idolatrous religious practices and saying **'you're wrong!'** he acknowledges their worship and it's as if he says... this is great; now let me show you the part of the jigsaw you're missing.

Paul had recently left Thessalonica and northern Greece after encountering opposition and conflict when preaching about Christ there. Here, in Athens, Paul is distressed to find a vast assortment of religious practices and idols. Certain groups of people (Epicureans) saw no need for the interruption of God in their hedonistic lifestyles. The Stoics worshipped many gods, and the Philosophers enjoyed intellectual thinking and debate. It was a hotchpotch society of eclectic beliefs.

Luke writes in the preceding verse to where we started reading (v21)

"All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas."

Clearly the people loved debate and had minds that were searching for deeper knowledge, but their unrestrained openness meant they remained confused about truth. It was as if the people were covering *every base* to ensure that they didn't miss out on worshipping the right god.

When I worked in Social Services I ran a small bible group for anyone who was exploring faith. My then-Line Manager was intrigued as to why several of us regularly disappeared into a side room to talk at lunchtime. This led to us having a few religious debates of our own. On one occasion I asked what her actual belief about God was.

Wendy said that she veered towards some New Age ideas, but she liked the calming practices of Buddhism. She also appreciated some elements of Christianity, but not the idea that Jesus claimed to be the Way. There was just no pinning her down to any one religious or spiritual practice. We eventually agreed, with tongue in cheek, that her religion was "the gospel according to Wendy!"

When we don't **know** what we believe, we may take this 'recipe' approach; a little bit of this religion, the parts of some of others we like, some healthy moral ideas that we think are sound ~ and in effect we create our **own** religion, based on our own desires and what suits us. It may be palatable, but it does not make it truth.

Paul goes to the synagogue and marketplace in Athens to preach Jesus as the one true way. His new ideas intrigue *and baffle* his listeners, and so he is taken to the Areopagus, a hill on which was sited a mixture of temples, cultural facilities and a judicial court. Given a forum to explain himself Paul respectfully acknowledges their religious worship and then uses this knowledge to lead them to the good news of Jesus.

To cover every possible religious avenue, they had built an altar to AN UNKNOWN GOD. And it is this *unknowing* state that Paul uses to introduce them to the God who **can** be known, the God who is **personal** and alive - and RELATIONAL.

Paul understands where the community are spiritually 'at' before he launches into a sermon.

Acts 17:23 he engages them by saying:

"As I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship — and this is what I am going to proclaim to you."

And so Paul takes them right back to speak of the One creator God, the only author of life and breath. Paul challenges their belief that gods can be created in the form of an inanimate idol, and instead reveals that God is alive and personal; he can be sought and found through repentance and belief in the resurrected one who claimed to be **The Way, the Truth and the Life - Jesus Christ**.

In effect, Paul takes their broad array of ideas and man-made notions and concepts and he channels them to focus everything on the person of the risen Jesus.

But Paul knew the importance of FIRST understanding the spiritual status of those he encountered, in order that he could build on their knowledge and point them to the one true God.

And it is so worth *our* taking time to know the stories of others, and to find out what, if any, knowledge or belief they already have of God, otherwise we may offend or simply baffle people.

*I had the privilege of meeting with someone very recently and spending over an hour with them, just talking and listening to their story. I discovered that their knowledge of the Christian faith is what I call 'ground zero'. When I offered to pray with them at the end of our meeting they said **'what is prayer?'***

More and more, as the generations pass, we will encounter people whose knowledge of God is not based on a Sunday school upbringing, or Christian school assemblies. We see this when we run the Easter or Christmas Experiences for the school - some children have never heard anything about Jesus, so what we are sharing with them is a whole new story.

And we *are* called to share the good news story, because this is God's mission for us. His call on our lives is to bring **us** back into relationship with himself, but then we are to be sent out to share God's life-bringing message of hope to those we encounter.

How wonderful it is that today we got to hear about **Hope** for those who are homeless. The Hope into Action charity is unashamedly Christian. Here, the good news of Jesus Christ is accompanied by *practical* action meeting *actual* need. The prayerful Friendship & Support Group and Rebecca as Empowerment Worker come alongside the new tenants and offer relational support.

How can we expect people who have been through the experience of homelessness to just be housed and make a success of it, when so often the cause of their situation is that they are relationally poor?

We of all people, have the answer to relational poverty. We do not have AN UNKNOWN GOD, but a God who is deeply personal and relational. He came down to earth and walked among us. Jesus showed us how to love one another and care with compassion. He gave up his life for us to be set free from our wrongdoing and enter back into relationship with our creator. He established the church, whose model was to be devoted to fellowship, sharing and supporting the vulnerable.

Jesus said we have an inheritance in God's kingdom because our love for God flows out in practical action; there cannot be a disconnect between our message and our actions.

Although some scholars read this passage as a call to meet the needs of Christian brothers and sisters, it seems to me that if we **look for where God is in others** we cannot eliminate the presence of God from anyone to whom he gives breath and life. Therefore I read Jesus' words as universal:

Matthew 25;

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. ...

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*Many years ago, a colleague in Bexley turned 40 and we all went out for a curry to celebrate. She was the most avid Elvis Presley fan I have ever met, he was to her most definitely 'the King.' That evening, when the time came to bring her a birthday cake we got the waiter to distract her and when she turned around we each had an Elvis mask on our face. It was hilarious. Our 25 faces all looked the same, we all had **his image** as we sang 'Happy Birthday'.*

*If only we could **see** the face of Jesus in everyone. How differently would we respond to those in need if we realised that they bear **his** image? How much more relational would we be if we understood that every person carries a hidden presence of Christ?*

When we respond to those in need we are not simply showing compassion or doing 'the right thing', we are honouring Christ directly.

This is what the **real** King says:

Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.

So to summarise...

We need to look to see where God **is** in everyone and, like Paul, rather than *dismiss* their 'unknowing' we can build on their knowledge to introduce them to a God who is *knowable* through Jesus Christ.

This Relational God is the one we are called to mirror to others. Paul says: We are God's offspring, and the way we '**live and move and have our being**' will either reflect Jesus to others, or it will not. Our practical engagement is evidence of our faith in Jesus.

Perhaps today, as we pray for and engage with HiAB we can see the face of Jesus in those who are homeless.

And maybe we could add to Jesus' words:

***I was homeless and you gave me a place to live.
I was lonely, and you befriended me.
I was lost and you showed me the way.***