



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Sunday, May 17, 2020

Scripture Passages: Act 17:22-31 & John 14:15-21

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's quite a dramatic scene. Paul speaks to the sophisticated inhabitants of Athens in front of the large rock called the Areopagus or Mars Hill which was also the site of the high court of appeal for Athens. We don't think he was on trial but he was certainly being called to account for his beliefs.

So what you need to know about this bit from the Acts of the Apostles is this: Paul, Silas and Timothy have been round and about the Mediterranean following the lead of the Holy Spirit in order to preach the Gospel. They've been to Macedonia – that went well, they've been to Thessalonica – that didn't go so well - and they've been to Berea – and that's where it all really came unstuck. There was conflict there that was dangerous enough for the new Christians to send Paul to Athens to wait out the storm.

So here he is – supposedly cooling his heels in the most culturally sophisticated city in the empire. But as he moves around the city, he sees the many altars devoted to various gods and he watches the people – those Athenians famed for being seekers after truth – citizens of a noble society whose learning and erudition were legendary even then – he watches them sacrifice to impotent human-made deities.

And this makes him crazy because it seems that the truth they've laid hold of is such a partial truth. Of course, Paul because of his life-altering experience of the living Christ is 100% convinced that the whole truth has been revealed to him. And so, Paul being Paul – and filled with this urgency - is pretty soon speaking about Jesus in the synagogues and temples and in the streets.

Now I imagine that he may have been a little provocative and insistent – well, you are when you know you've got hold of the truth aren't you? He was provocative enough to capture the attention of some philosophers: some Stoics and Epicureans. And that's interesting.

St. Luke reminds us that Athens as well as being a financial marketplace was a marketplace of ideas as well. He says, that it was likely this predisposition to be open to new ideas that gained Paul a hearing in the first place in the great city. He reminds us that, . . . “all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.”

And so, St. Paul, takes this opportunity. What follows is a pedagogical masterpiece. Like all great teachers, St. Paul begins with the known and moves to the unknown, taking his students with him. The sermon he preaches here is the only complete one we have. And what’s really really interesting about it is that you can hear he’s beginning to learn how to preach to Pagans or Gentiles – those completely outside the Jewish community of faith that he primarily belongs to – and of course to those who have never heard the name of Jesus.

Now I’m not saying that St. Paul intended to have a fully fledged campaign to evangelize the Gentiles at this point. I don’t think that – that’s one of the reasons I love Acts 17. It really does seem as if he couldn’t help himself after seeing how enslaved the Athenians were to idolatry of one description or another and he wanted to release them from that bondage.

So he begins sympathetically and he praises and affirms them for their religiosity or their spirituality –their tendency to seek the ‘something more’. He says that he really understands that they search to fill that God-shaped hole in their lives, and he’s discovered something significant that might help,

For 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. [this is] the God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth.

And understanding what they seek for, he has an answer: he says our God – the Creator and Redeemer - is living and active. God is our source – AND God is not far from each one of us. For “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.’”

Paul is speaking their language.

Now.

Lest this be seen as some kind of manipulation, let’s remember here that St. Paul was a true believer. The direction of his life had been actually stopped, and physically, emotionally, and spiritually been turned right around by an encounter with Jesus: a 180-degree turn. So this is not a man that has an ulterior or hidden agenda.

He believes in the power of God to change our lives here and now to be reoriented according to the law of God's love. And more, that we can build the kingdom of God now – here – if we believe too.

And what Paul is about on these missionary journeys is sharing this reality with everyone he can – and for no other reason than he believes it to be the truth. He certainly derived no benefit from his efforts. He himself said that he'd been beaten, imprisoned and shipwrecked and more because of the Gospel. And still he persisted. Because he knew the strength and sense of purpose in life and consolation that belief in the one true God gives and he was determined to offer that as it had been gifted to him.

And the Athenians for their part had a particular understanding of the Gods they worshipped; because in a world where there are multiple Gods – you can never be truly sure you're worshipping them all. The altar in honour of the unknown God was a cultural and spiritual contingency plan. The story goes that there was once a great plague in Athens (I am not making this up folks) during which, the people sacrificed to every god they knew at every altar in the city but still the plague raged on. And someone had the bright idea that just in case the Athenians hadn't discovered all the gods, and therefore hadn't sacrificed to all the gods, and just in case one was left out and just in case this had offended some god, they erected an altar to that unknown god on Mars Hill and then sacrificed.

And, so the story goes, apparently, the plague stopped after that.

So this altar was an ongoing contingency plan.

So Paul speaks into that understanding or hope or fear – whatever you want to label it and he affirms the search or the journey for God, but, he does something arresting: he claims that altar of the unknown God for Jesus Christ. He reveals to the Athenians the identity of the unknown God. And then he claims all those who seek for God but yet do not know his name and he calls them to leave that journey and to arrive at their destination – that destination being belief in Jesus Christ.

Reading this incident again, I was powerfully reminded of a phenomenon that's been identified in the midst of this Pandemic. Did you know that the incidence of people googling "prayer" and "the existence of God" has exploded? An absolute explosion of interest. I don't know why and I won't speculate here – I suspect there are as many reasons for it as there are people who have googled.

What I know is that that yearning is real – it's measurable, documentable. It's as real as the altar to an unknown God was. I couldn't help but make the connection between that altar which is like one big question mark - and the yearning we're seeing as people Google God and prayer. Perhaps there is a correlation here?

And perhaps this is one of those times for us to claim this particular phenomenon for our God and to connect up this human yearning with God's heart for us. And not for any reason except that we too are convinced of the love of the living God for us - the God who created us to be in relationship with him - Our Father in heaven. Certainly, I don't think Paul wouldn't have hesitated!

Perhaps the message here is that particularly now - right now - we need to interact with our world as so many Mars Hills - we need always to be ready to make an account of the hope that is within us as Christians who have the incredible benefit of living in the world but who are not of it. We can - with intention and love - the love of God - speak to our culture.

At our best, Christians have always been just as comfortable living, learning and sharing the Gospel in the marketplace of ideas as in the ministry of the church. In movements modeled after Paul at the Areopagus, believers have welcomed the opportunity to meet real people where they really live, work, and think, and offer our "strange ideas" about love, rebirth, and the resurrection.

And unlike St Paul who hadn't the benefit of an established Christian community of warmth and welcome to invite people into, we do. It's a way of thinking and being in the world as a Christian - it's a state of mind, and a commitment. "If you love me, keep my commandments"

We are people who proclaim the love of God in Jesus.

I was also thinking about that close connection between obedience and love that Jesus makes in our Gospel reading this morning.

You see, when Jesus talks about obedience, it is from a very particular point of view.

He is the master communicator - and is able to describe something of the relationship between what we believe and what we practice, he's able to describe the relationship between the leader and follower and between our Father and we as the children of God.

The reasoning is very close in these few verses in John and it's all about connections: it's a little bit like the ankle bone is connected to the leg bone is connected to the hip bone ,...

It seems to me that the whole passage hinges on the word "if". If you love me, keep my commandments. Here we have a very close connection between love and what that love means in practice. "If" usually implies contingency or dependence in some way - and it's no different in this case. In fact, it seems that the one simply follows from the other.

Reading the rest of the chapter, I think that Jesus spoke these words as a statement of fact. If we, as Christians follow and love Jesus – as we've been loved, then it follows logically that we will try to make that love concrete and obvious to those in our lives too.

And there is no expectation that we will do this alone. In fact, our track record should probably tell us a lot about our ability to do this on our own. It's not so great. So, Jesus goes a step further. He promises even more comfort, strength, and the presence of God in another form. He promises to send us the Holy Spirit. In the old King James version of the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit was called "the comforter". Other translations call the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Counselor, the Helper and Friend. All of these names have a certain active quality about them. All of these names speak of accompaniment and this is Jesus' next promise to the disciples. He says, he will not leave us orphaned. He will not leave us to do this work and carry on his teaching in the world alone. The Father will send the Holy Spirit.

But let's pause here just for a moment and think about these descriptors. Because I think they're about more than helping us do God's work. I think the Spirit's voice is the one who whispers in our ear when we're scared and confused in a time like this – and reminds us who we are – and who we belong to? I think the Spirit helps us to recognize God's voice – the Good Shepherd's voice – the still small, but persistent, and loving voice in the midst of the noise of this world. Especially in a time like this when we're anxious, and unsure, and need guidance. I think the Spirit helps us redeem this anxious and dangerous time and guides us as we try to bring sense out of confusion. I think it's the Spirit who reminds us that loving our neighbour – as we love ourselves – is core operating policy for the ones who follow Jesus - so the law of love is the lens through which we see everything.

And for us, this means that as we strive to be faithful together, Jesus lives as a powerful force within us. The Holy Spirit was intended as the presence of God to guide and guard and accompany us in our attempts to keep Jesus' commandments to love God and to love our neighbours as ourselves.

It's not always easy to live like this. And we are in the midst of demonstration of the difficulty. We have all had to give up a lot for our neighbour – our attempts at physical distancing are wearing thin, I know. But we are being called to carry on doing that – remembering that what we do, we do for the least and most vulnerable among us. But the way that we love each other is a testament or a sermon to the world that we really do believe this stuff. Like Paul – we have no other motive than that: With the help of the Holy Spirit, in the practice of our faith, we will continue to try to be the face and hands of Christ to the world.

It is as simple -- and as difficult as that.

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