

Homily for Easter 6, 2020

Acts 17:22-31

'Public Christianity'

TEXT

Acts 17:22-32

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.'

INTRODUCTION

I think it's fair to say that we increasingly live in a time and place when religion and religious people are tolerated, as long as they keep their religion to themselves. Perhaps you've heard things that give this impression? So, most people don't mind if you have your faith and your spiritual life, as long as it's your private thing. Don't bring it into your politics; don't bring it into your work; don't bring it into your social conversations, and then everything will be okay.

Now, while we can understand some of this – as sometimes perhaps Christians haven't conducted themselves honorably in the public realm (notice what St Peter reminds us: Do this with gentleness and reverence) and no one, Christians included, wants the Christian faith forced on anyone – we need to be clear as Christians, that *while our faith is personal, it can never be completely private.*

Christianity is, by its very nature, *public*.

Later in the book of Acts, St Paul says of the key events to do with Jesus and the early Church: '*These things were not done in a corner*'. They are public, on the stage of history: '*To be proclaimed from the rooftops*', Jesus says. The Christian message is not one which is only for private individuals to find peace in their hearts - although that's part of it – the Christian message also is to interact with other ideas and worldviews and religions and philosophies in the public square.

In our text today we see how St Paul did this in Athens. And as we look closely at this account we'll see three things: how he first makes **contact**; he secondly builds a **connection**; and he thirdly uses God's truth to **confront** –even as there is comfort as well. The contact; the connection; and the confrontation. A little alliteration for your Sunday morning.

MAKING CONTACT

So first, St Paul makes contact.

Now this trip to Athens was a bit of an accident. Paul didn't plan to go there as such, but people were trying to arrest him or worse, so some of the believers had taken him away for his own safety and he had ended up in Athens

waiting for Silas and Timothy. But he never missed an opportunity. We read before our text that he was distressed to see the city full of idols, and so he argued in the synagogue and in the market place, and he proclaimed Jesus and the resurrection. There were some Greek philosophers there who heard him and asked to hear more, so he ended up giving this speech in our text today.

He begins, *'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."* (Acts 17:22,23) Now there's a few ways here that Paul is initially simply making contact.

Firstly, it's just that he's there – he's present in the places where people met and discussed things important to life. Now this is a fairly basic and fundamental point, but for the Christian faith to interact in the public domain, Christians need to be there – to know and interact with people outside the Church.

But secondly, he's not only present, but he *'looked carefully'* it says at their objects of worship – he investigated, he examined what was going on there. Notice how St Paul did not come with a pre-packaged Christian pitch wherever he went. He takes the time to seek out carefully what is going on in this context - what makes these people tick. The Christian Church always needs be to doing this – understanding what's actually going on in our culture and what are the important issues for the people in our lives.

And thirdly then, notice that, as Paul seeks to make contact with these people, he looks for a particular point of contact: this altar they had *'to an unknown god'*. They seemingly wanted to cover all conceivable bases, and Paul discerns that in that place at that time, here is an entry way – here's a point of contact for the Christian message: *'What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.'*

Now this sort of thing looked different depending on where Paul was and to whom he was talking – as it looks different for the Church in every age. The hard work, and the great need for wisdom, is in discerning what are the points of contact for the Church today – whether it be, in our current times, an acknowledgement again of the reality of death; our inability to control events in this world; our need for relationship. Who knows - there are all sorts of points of contact between the Christian's message and the events of any time and place, but the principle is always there: **there's a contact.**

BUILDING A CONNECTION

Next, St Paul builds a connection.

It's interesting to note where Paul starts here: he doesn't go straight to Jesus, to salvation, but he starts with the bigger picture – with creation. He says, *'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... he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.'* (Acts 17:24,25) And it goes on. He points them to the Bible's revelation of the one true God as the creator and sustainer of the whole creation, who is completely above and beyond the created order. And yet later on, he says, *'though indeed he is not far from each one of us.'* (Acts 17:27)

This is the Christians view of God: completely other from his creation; eternal; all-powerful; transcendent (to use the fancy technical language); and yet also immanent – close, accessible and personal.

So notice how St Paul starts in the big picture – where this world came from, and whether there's a god at all, and if so what sort of god. We might call this the level of worldview. And the Christian faith can and needs to interact with the world at this level, digging down deep to how we look at all of life.

Now there's a lot in here that we can't touch on for the sake of time today, but for now what I really want to draw your attention to is how St Paul builds this connection between the Christian teaching of God and creation, and the Athenians. What does he do to build this connection? Notice he quotes their own world: *"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.” This is quite amazing, because these aren’t quotes from the Old Testament – they are quotes from Greek pagan literature. Scholars think one of them is from a poem about Zeus.

So please do notice what Paul does here: he is distressed by what he sees in Athens spiritually, but when seeks to build a connection with them he doesn’t just rubbish everything – instead he says, ‘I can see how extremely religious you are in every way’. And when he wants to articulate the Christian view of God and creation, he’s even willing to suggest that there are traces of this truth in their own religious poetry. He finds something he can build on, and work with. It’s really quite brilliant, and bold and courageous.

So in our time, think about something like the novels people read or the movies people watch. Sometimes there can be a tendency for Christians to only read books or watch movies with Christian themes. And while we certainly do need to be discerning in what we expose ourselves and our children to and what’s healthy, it’s a problem if the church doesn’t know what people are reading and watching in the culture. Notice St Paul knew their religious poetry!

And I’d suggest not only should we be reading non-Christian books and watching non-Christian movies, again with discernment about what’s appropriate and healthy, but we need to do that and be looking for the connections that can be built on to the Christian message. All these movies about superheroes: well, let me tell you about the true hero who makes the ultimate sacrifice. All these books about self-improvement: well, let us proclaim the God who offers help to those who have discovered that they are not all they should be.

CONFRONTING WITH TRUTH

So he makes contact; he builds a connection; and finally he uses God’s truth to confront, even as he comforts.

While there is a care and gentleness here, and while there is an internal effort to meet these Athenians where they are, St Paul does not shrink back from the confrontational nature of the Christian message either. He says, ³⁰*While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent,* ³¹*because 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.’ (Acts 17:30,31)* So there’s a call to repentance here: for them to turn to the one true God. And there’s an urgency to this, because he says there is a judgment day coming.

This is also a part of the Christian worldview that needs to be communicated: that history is heading somewhere; that God has a plan to bring all things to a goal – a righteous judgment by a man, whom he has appointed. He’s talking about Jesus.

And it is interesting the way he argues here: he says that in the resurrection of Christ (which we’re especially celebrating during this season of Easter), among the many things the Resurrection means and points to and does – one is that it is God’s assurance of the final judgment and the need to repent now. Fairly strong stuff, hey? Confronting even. But it’s part of the Christian message. Even as the Church reaches out and make contact and builds connections, it’s important that we also get to the call to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

We can err on one side or the other: sometimes we’re too quick and heavy – going straight to sin and grace, Jesus and the cross. Sometimes Christians think we just get John 3:16 up there on a sign and the job’s done. And so there’s a need for more contact making; more connection building. But at other times we can do so much of that, and we shy away from the confronting nature of the Christian message.

Now I said Paul confronts even as he comforts – because notice there is comfort here, the Gospel is implicit here. Firstly, because God is patient in giving all people an opportunity to turn back to him; but also because this turning back, this repentance, means that there is forgiveness there. Turning back to God means there is a loving Father waiting to receive us.

Now again, what that looks like for the Church today is challenging. What is our marketplace? What is our Areopagus? Well, one thing that came to mind as a modern day example of all this is how at Google headquarters in California, they have these regular public talks, where Google and YouTube employees will gather and hear from some interesting public person. And on a number of occasions they've invited prominent Christian thinkers to speak. I've watched ones by Pastor Tim Keller and Bishop Robert Barron if those names mean anything to you.

You could make a case that there in Silicon Valley is something like an Aeropagus of our world today, and there is the Christian message still interacting in that public square. And what I admire as I watch those Christians who have spoken there – they've done such a good job – is that they're there, making contact, looking for points of contact, building the connections, and using reason and logic and persuasion to bring people along with them. And they don't shrink back from proclaiming God's truth: of the need for repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

Directly after our text, we hear the response to Paul's time in Athens: *'When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, 'We will hear again about this.'* (Acts 17:32) And, some became believers. So it is today: some will scoff; some will have questions; some will believe – which in the end is always the work of the Holy Spirit we heard Jesus promise of, in our Gospel reading.

But let us remember that while the Christian faith is deeply personal, it can never be merely private: the Christian message needs be in the public square. God grant it for Jesus' sake, Amen.