

Acts 17 ²² Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious.²³ For 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.

²⁴ “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. ²⁵ And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. ²⁶ From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. ²⁷ God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸ ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’

²⁹ “Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. ³⁰ In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. ³¹ For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

Introduction

We live in an age and a society, where to be a Christian is to be in a small minority. Our neighbours and friends are often kind and good people, but rarely share our Christian faith and maybe have very little understanding of what it means to be a follower of Christ.

This means many of us find it difficult to share our faith with others.

We might think it was much easier in the time of the early church, but it certainly wasn’t straightforward for Paul in Athens.

Even though it was a very different world then, there is much that we can learn from this story.

Athens wasn’t the biggest city in the Roman Empire, but it was a city with a glorious past. It was the home of democracy and the home of Plato, Socrates and Aristotle. Some of its glory had faded but it was still a place filled with wonderful works of art and architecture, a great University town, the place of philosophy and debate, where the intellectual cream of the former Greek Empire and culture would gather.

In fact, one could say it was the Oxford of the ancient world.

And yet here were these very intelligent people worshipping idols – gods of metal and stone and not just one but thousands of them.

Paul wasn’t overawed by all this, nor was he complacent, nor was he angry – he didn’t become a ranting soapbox evangelist; but he was *greatly distressed*..

*v. 16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was **greatly distressed** to see that the city was full of idols.*

In this he was echoing the heart of his heavenly Father. As Paul says in vv.26 & 27, God ordered the world in a particular way *so that people would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him.*

How much do you long that those around you, your neighbours, friends, colleagues, unbelieving members of your family might *seek God and perhaps reach out for him and find him?*

We might feel that our “post-Christian world” is a very different world to ancient Athens. Of course, Paul was living in a *pre-Christian* world where virtually no-one had heard of Jesus and certainly in Greece no one had any concept of a single

all-powerful creator God, who was holy, or sin, or the need for forgiveness, or of God sending his Christ, his Messiah, his divinely anointed rescuer.

Moreover, Paul tells the locals: ²² *I see that you are very religious, and we might well think: 'Well that's a bit different from our own secular age.'*

However, our present age is often just as ignorant of the fundamental truths of Christianity or even of the story of Jesus as they were in ancient Athens.

And whilst many would not think of themselves as being *very religious*, they have just as strong an allegiance to a whole different range of *objects of worship*: the god of success in career, or financial security, or having the latest gadget or fashion, the god of exciting experiences, and increasingly in recent years the god of the self:

*I must be true to myself, I can be whatever I want to be,
I must carefully present the best image of myself on social media,
I must follow my desires whatever the consequences for others*

Even if people do have some kind of belief in an all-powerful God, like the ancient Athenians, they often believe he can only be found in a religious building – be that an ancient temple in ancient Athens or a church in our present day, because they think that way you can keep God contained and controlled.

Many who still have some kind of belief in an all-powerful creator God, believe that if they show him a nod of respect by being reasonably kind and nice and maybe even occasionally going to church at Christmas and sometimes giving to charity, they'll keep God happy.

If there is a God, they want to keep him contained if not in an actual temple like the Athenians, then in a little religious compartment of their lives, which occasionally they visit but most of the time is conveniently out of the way.

And yet – like the ancient Athenians – some at least have a sense or a longing that there must be something more. The Athenians had an altar to the unknown God. This might have been because they were frightened of ignoring a god they didn't know about and might therefore be in danger of incurring his wrath. Today, many look at the beauty of creation or they are brought face to face with the reality of the death of a loved one and they find they cannot believe that this world is all that there is. There must be something more.

So maybe in looking at how Paul reached out to the ancient Athenians, we can learn how to reach out to modern Cholseyites and Moulshfordians – to our friends and colleagues, to our neighbours, even to those members of our own families who do not understand our faith.

First, Paul seeks to understand the thinking of those he meets.

He talks about ²³ *walking around and looking carefully at their objects of worship.*

Paul tries to understand where these Athenians are coming from, what makes them tick. It is a challenge to us, to the way we approach those around us who are not Christians, to try and work out what are their *objects of worship* – In other words what is the most important thing in their life ?

Paul *looked carefully...* and realised that behind this idol worship was - at least in some - a real spiritual hunger to find the true God who could bring meaning, purpose and forgiveness into their lives.

So we need to pray that the Spirit of Jesus in us will enable us to see those around us through his understanding eyes.

Secondly, Paul starts in the shoes of his hearers

Michael Green once put it, "*When sharing the Good News we need to realise that people are like islands and we must row around them to find a gentle beach on which to land rather than storm the cliffs.*"

He connects in a very sympathetic way with where people were:

²³*I see that in every way you are very religious. I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.*

Many today will say they are agnostics: there may be a God, but they don't know. Some just use that as an excuse just to *get on with living their life their own way without exploring further*. But others are thinking: *even though I don't know, I really would like to find out*. Paul gives the Athenians the benefit of the doubt and presumes that they really would like to find out who the *Unknown God* is.

A good lesson for us: if you can see that they are closed and really not interested in finding out any more then by all means carry on praying for them and showing God's kindness and love towards them but stop wasting your time trying to argue with them. But if it's not clear, give them the benefit of the doubt; that there is a desire within them to find out more.

Thirdly, Paul spoke to their longing, that emptiness in their soul: ²³ *So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship* What's more he agrees with them that in the normal course of things it is very understandable for mankind to find it impossible to discover the truth about God – indeed God himself understands this:

³⁰*In the past God overlooked such ignorance...even though He had revealed himself through creation, through the sense of longing we have for "something more", through the love and compassion of human beings at their best, who are God's offspring.*

However, finally, Paul speaks very plainly: *Now, everything has changed, because He has clearly revealed himself in Jesus Christ, and we can know this is true because he alone of all human beings has risen from the dead (not just resuscitation like some people or Lazarus, but resurrection).*

Because Paul is confident in the gospel and because he loves those to whom he is speaking, he is willing to talk not only about Jesus but the fact that one day we shall meet him face to face and be answerable to Him.

³¹*God has set a day when **he will judge the world with justice** by [Jesus].*

We are often nervous of speaking about this. There have been too many caricatures of hellfire and brimstone, which put us off. But everyone knows death is a reality and that it can come suddenly and unexpectedly - especially at this time when we are reminded of the fact daily in the news headlines.

Also, everyone has a sense of justice and the many injustices in this world, so there is often deep down a longing for a day when everything is put right – that actually means a day of judgement. There are times when love means that it is right to get our friends to think about that. Love means we seek that right moment, whether it is when like Paul we are having an intellectual debate or it is when someone is clearly opening up to these questions. The Spirit of Jesus will guide us.

If we truly love Jesus, we will love our neighbours. If we truly love our neighbours then like Paul, we will long that they come to know Jesus, we will seek to understand where they are coming from and stand in their shoes, so that we can make a connection. We will pray for the opportunity to speak the truth in love, to share how the reality of God's love, the good news of Jesus meets their deepest longings and like Paul we will know we can only do this by the grace and guidance of the Holy Spirit.