

Acts 17: 22-31

John 14: 15-21

“For in him we live and move and have our being.”

We are galloping around the book of Acts in the Lectionary and after been introduced to Saul at the stoning of Stephen last week, this week we find ourselves with Saul, who is now Paul, in full flow preaching to the people of Athens at the Areopagus. This had been the central court for civil, criminal and religious matters and even under Roman rule it remained the place where meetings were held to discuss philosophy, religion and law.

In our reading Paul is in Athens waiting for Silas and Timothy to join him. He had had to leave Macedonia in something of a hurry, possibly without packing his bags, in order to escape persecution. There doesn't seem on the face of it any particularly good reason why he was doing this in Athens rather than anywhere else you might wish to name. Like some in Bradford today he had effectively been sent here to await some sort of decision about what to do next!

Having arrived in Athens he walked round the city perhaps to get his bearings but also to see what he might see. I think this is exactly the sort of thing we might do when we first arrive in a foreign city. In Athens of course some of us might start by looking at the local football grounds but Paul walked round looking at a city full of idols. He termed these idols as “objects of worship” in our reading this morning and he was disgusted by what he saw.

He says that the people are obviously very religious but he asks whether they are in a right relationship with God. It is perfectly possible to believe we are doing the right thing in our faith when actually we have lost our way. There are whole Churches that might fit that description today but hopefully not St Paul's.

Among the idols that Paul had seen was one with the inscription “To an unknown God”. The Greeks had a God for everything but just in case they had forgotten something they had included an extra. If you are going to have a God for everything then the accountant in me says that to throw in some extras, just in case, seems very sensible but as Paul had argued in the Grecian synagogues prior to our reading this totally misunderstands the nature of God.

For the people of Greece the idea of one God was new and it was a strange idea. We have thousands of them and yet you tell us there is only one. What a strange idea. Others living in Athens will have had other ideas and we are told that among others that Paul encountered were Epicurean and Stoic philosophers.

Epicureans generally believed that God existed but that he was not interested, or involved, in mankind and that the main purpose of human life was pleasure. On the other hand the Stoic's thought God was the world's soul and that the purpose of life was to rise above all things so that one showed no emotional response to either pain or pleasure.

Paul was therefore brought to a meeting of the Council where, we are told, “the Athenians and foreigners who lived there spent their time in nothing else but to tell and hear some new thing”.

Paul knowing this therefore focussed on this inscription to an unknown God. “What you worship as unknown I am going to proclaim to you”, he says. Paul describes God in very much the same terms as, I think, we would describe him.

Paul starts with creation “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth. He does not live in temples built with hands nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From 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, so 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. For “in him” we live and move and have our being”

There is a reminder here from last week’s reading that God does not live in buildings. Knowing God is about relationship with God. The people of Athens worshipped lots of Gods but they were not in relationship with any of them. God is not contained in buildings or in statues rather he is within us. God is in the relationships we build with other people. God is in the love we show to others.

Paul though does not reprimand the people of Athens rather he speaks in a way that is relevant to their culture. It can be very difficult to accept somebody else’s culture that is different to our own. The British tend to start by thinking our culture in the only culture.

Paul thought of God in the sense of Moses and the Old Testament prophets. Paul spoke separately of God as a “living God who made the heaven and the earth and the sea” but he spoke to the Athenians in the sense of their Unknown God because the Athenians knew nothing about Moses and the Old Testament prophets and he quotes from a couple of their local poet philosophers

I was surprised to find that “For in God we live and move and have our being” is a quote from 600BC written by Epimenides. It sounds very New Testament. We are his offspring was written by Aratus (315-240BC). Paul also quotes from Greek poets elsewhere so he was obviously quite into his Greek poetry although I think this aspect of his life is often overlooked. Paul found inspiration, and the Spirit of God, in these poets of old. God is to be found in places where we might not expect him.

Like Paul we need to tell people that God loves them and we need to be sensitive to their understanding. There is no point in telling them if we do it in a way they do not understand. Our God is unknown to many people and it is our job to ensure that our God does not remain unknown. Jesus came and showed us God’s love for us. Our society is littered with modern day idols that may be less literal than the idols in Athens but which are nonetheless real.

God is revealed to us by Jesus. Paul's final testimony is about Jesus and the assurance God gives us by raising Jesus from the dead. Mention of the resurrection led to a commotion and the end of the meeting. The resurrection of Jesus was for some of the Athenians a step too far but we are told some believed and became followers.

For many they could not imagine a God that would want to be at one with us. They could not imagine a God who is willing to give everything for you and me. They could not imagine a God full of love for you and for me.

In John's Gospel Jesus tells the disciples that he is sending them the Holy Spirit. Jesus says that this Spirit will abide with us and live inside us. If we open ourselves then no idols we make will withstand the truth of God's love. If we believe then God's presence will live inside us, perhaps unnoticed by us but guiding us in our lives.

In the coming weeks we will hear more about the Holy Spirit and its effect on the early Church. People from every known nation will hear the Gospel, will confess their sins and be baptised. Those people will tell others about Jesus. Last week we celebrated a number of baptisms here at St Paul's. Isn't that fantastic and let's hope we can celebrate more in the future.

To celebrate that joy we need to tell people about Jesus. In the next few weeks we are going to hear about shipwrecks, persecution, imprisonment and executions. We are going to hear about love, sharing and the needs of the poor and vulnerable in society. We are going to hear about the Spirit at work in the early Church in abundance. Are we letting that same Spirit into our lives today? If so then the Spirit is alive and well here in Manningham but we still need to give it our continual support.

Jesus told his disciples he would not leave them as orphans rather, he says, God will guide us, comfort us, and love us forever. For in him we live and move and have our being.

Amen