

“Paul stood in front of the Areopagus” and preached to the Athenians. This comes rather out of the blue for us; may be a little puzzling, in fact. What are we doing in Athens all of a sudden? And what does Athens have to do with Easter?

As always in the Easter season we’ve been hearing from the Book of Acts for the past five weeks. Up to now, all has been in Jerusalem, beginning with Peter’s sermon to all the people gathered on the Day of Pentecost. (2:14a, 22-32, 36-41) (That hasn’t happened yet in our liturgical year; will come in another two weeks.) Then the apostles and all the believers were gathered together in Jerusalem, having all things in common, eating, worshiping, praising God; the Lord adding to their number day by day. From there we jumped to Stephen’s witnessing before he was stoned to death outside the city. (7:55-60) It’s hard to follow the story line when the readings jump back and forth this way, and . . .

Now, here we are (10 chapters later) far from Jerusalem, with Paul in Athens. Quite a leap. Paul first came into the story at the stoning of Stephen, where he stood by holding the cloaks of the ones throwing stones, rather pleased with the whole affair. Later, though, he was struck down and blinded by the light of Christ, while on the way to arrest any followers of Jesus in Damascus. Healed of his blindness, baptized, filled with the Holy Spirit, Paul soon began preaching in the synagogues of Damascus: Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah. (9:1-20, 22).

He has traveled a long way since, sometimes successful in his mission, proclaiming the risen Jesus to Jews and Gentiles; sometimes not. The Spirit has led him from Asia Minor to Greece. He’s gone from city to city, driven out more often than not. Now, he is in Athens, alone; his companions, Timothy and Silas, haven’t caught up with him yet. They are still in the last town, from which Paul has made another narrow escape.

We have only the middle of the story in the lectionary. So, here’s how it begins: “While Paul was waiting for [his companions] he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols.” (17:16) We can see him walking the city, craning his neck, looking up at the magnificent temples to the gods of Greece and Rome. We would love to do this ourselves, we’d love to see it all. To us, these are all history and art, they don’t pack any spiritual wallop. We admire their form and beauty, grateful these products of human creativity have survived. But it was not so for the Athenians, or for Paul. For them there was a real spiritual wallop because those statues were worshiped as a real presence of the gods they represented.

So, without waiting for the companions whose help he’d often needed when he was in a tight spot, Paul started right in talking about Jesus and resurrection. The man had no fear; and he had no shame. He would talk to anybody about Jesus. He argued with Jews in the synagogue, with whoever happened to be in the marketplace, and with some philosophers, too. He definitely attracted a lot of attention. The story continues:

Some said, “What does this babbler want to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.” (This was because he was telling the good news

about Jesus and the resurrection.) So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.” Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.” (17:18-21)

That sounds promising. God is always doing a new thing; has done a new thing in Jesus; the Athenians are interested in what is new. Athens had been a trading city for centuries; it was sophisticated, diverse, tolerant, curious; the Athenians may be open enough to be able to hear and receive what God has done. Paul may get a very good hearing here.

He gave a great sermon. Met them where they were. Saw the positive, the very real possibility in their seeking. He was a learned, sophisticated man himself; not only a Pharisee, learned in the law of Moses and all the scriptures, but also knowledgeable about Greek culture, philosophers and poets, because he grew up in a city much influenced by the Greeks.

So Paul readily found a way to bridge the gap between Athens and Jerusalem: the altar “to an unknown god.” He saw it as a sign that, for all the temples and gods in Athens, the Athenians were seeking something greater and deeper, and he could show them who it is who will satisfy their spiritual hunger.

In making the connection, he did not water down or compromise his own tradition and experience, or theirs. What they were seeking and did not know, he had known and could name, had named in the market place: Jesus the resurrected one. Even when Paul had not been seeking anything new but was actively opposing it, he had been found by Him.

What Paul said to the Athenians: though we seek him, “he is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’”—is very like what we heard Jesus say this morning, from the Gospel acc to John: “‘because I live, you also will live. On that day [the day when the Father will give the Spirit, the day of resurrection in John] you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.’”

What was Paul doing in Athens? Bringing Easter in a way that Athenians would be able to see, offering a way in to what they hunger for without knowing what it is. But it will take more than curiosity or a penchant for novelty for the connection to happen. This, after all, is about God and not ourselves. Not a diversion by what is interesting or appealing today, but commitment—a commitment as great as God’s commitment to human beings and creation from the beginning.

“Believe in God, believe also in me” Jesus told the disciples in the portion of the Gospel according to John we heard last Sunday. (14: 1) “Love me,” he says today. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” (14: 15) That is to follow in his way, to live in him and he in us.

God “commands all people everywhere to repent,” Paul told them. It is time now to turn around, move off the panoply of options and into, onto the way.

How did Paul's message go over at the Areopagus, the place where matters of law, philosophy, and politics were debated and decided? Here is the end of the story:

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, "We will hear you again about this." At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. (17: 32-33; 18: 1)

“We will hear you again about this,” some of them said. But they did not. Paul left the city. The offer of knowing God in Jesus Christ is made: *Something has happened far from you in another culture, place and time, and yet is very near you. It concerns your very life.* But the offer does not have to be accepted. Not because Christ is one option among many so it does not matter all that much what you choose; but because it makes all the difference. His way is never the way of force or violence, but always the way of love. And love cannot be imposed, only received. Like Paul, we, too, can give “an accounting for the hope that is in” us, not with force but with gentleness and a reverence for the other person that is, at the same time, reverence for God. (*See 1 Peter 3: 15-16*)

There is no letter to the Athenians in the New Testament. There was no church begun there that day, though a few who heard Paul did come to believe. It would be almost three hundred years before Greece and the whole Roman Empire became Christian, by decree of the emperor, Constantine. That was religion imposed, not love searched for, sought after, and found. As Christianity would be imposed by future empires, as well, in Africa and parts of South Asia, on this continent and South America.

The amazing thing is that even religion imposed by decree and by violence of all kinds has not, cannot, entirely shut out the Spirit of truth. (*See John 14: 17*) No more than can our own appetite for the superficial or our anxiety to keep all our options open. The crucified and resurrected one will make himself known to any and all who receive him wherever and whenever they are. Easter will happen again and again. It has everything to do with Jerusalem and Athens, Bethesda and Bujumbura, and every place and time.

New life begins, has begun, will be begin again, and will abide.