

Reaching Cultured Pagans – Paul in Athens

Acts 17:22-31

Easter 6 - May 2023

Acts 17:22-31 (ESV)

²² So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. ²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷ that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, ²⁸ for

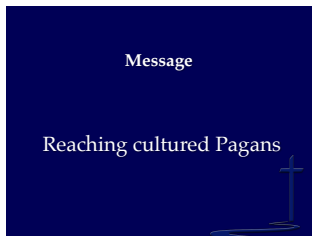
“‘In him we live and move and have our being’;

as even some of your own poets have said,

“‘For we are indeed his offspring.’

²⁹ Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. ³⁰ The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world 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:



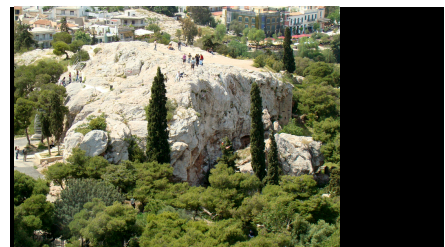
Today we are joining St Paul in Athens talking about where not to look for God and what God wants from us.

Text

We are in Athens in the year AD 51 during Paul's first missionary journey west. He is geographically in Europe and learning how to reach Pagan Gentiles with the story of a Jewish Messiah as the crucified, resurrected and ascended Son of God and Saviour of the World. This was not going to be easy!

After three days of local on-the-ground research and networking he goes to a special place where people went to present new ideas and discuss philosophy - perhaps a bit like TED Talks of his day? There he is invited to speak. But note, he does his ground research first!

The place where he is invited to speak is known in Greek as the 'Areopagus' and sometimes in English as 'Mars Hill'. It's a rough limestone outcrop half way up the hill to the majestic Acropolis site that still overlooks Athens today. Despite being rough uncut marble its very textured surface has been polished smooth by human contact. In a city that cultivated philosophy this was the place people presented new ideas and debated them.



Here is a picture of it today with a few people on it and without buildings of ancient times.

I was very pleased to get there a few months before Covid so I just have to show you some of our pictures!

These are the only steps to the top of the rock so in them I could literally walk in the footsteps of St Paul.



To the right of these steps is a bronze plaque in modern Greek with the passage of Paul's speech as we heard from Acts 17.

It's seen here flanked by two sweaty tourists!

In English it's less than 270 words -so a short sermon- at just 15% of my typical length!



So picture the scene in AD 51 when some of the smartest minds in sophisticated Athens are on hand to hear the latest from a visiting Jew. What is he going to say in the few minutes he has before they loose interest?

As I stood on the Areopagus and looked out it occurred to me that Paul may have started with a wry comment?



Why do I say this?

Paul is standing on a rock outcrop with a view upwards and a view downwards.



If you look upwards from there towards the Acropolis -the premier site for temples of all dedications you see this.

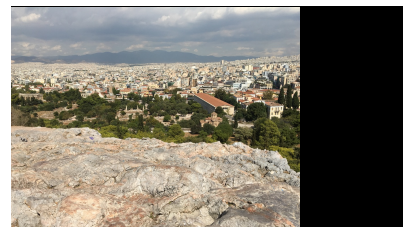


Today the ruins of that center piece temple to Athena - known as the 'Parthenon'- can be seen undergoing restoration:



Then if you then look downwards to one side from the Aeropagus you behold the heart of Ancient Athens known as the 'Agora'.

A few of its ancient temples and shrines remain there today. It was then packed with places of worship and veneration.



So the skyline from where Paul is standing overlooking Athens is full of temples.

With all this in view Paul begins his focused address -:

“Men of Athens, *Were women present?*

I perceive that in every way you are very religious.”

With awesomely constructed temples above and below, Paul was reading the architecture of Athens and bringing a spiritual profile of the city.

In his previous few days of discerning the city he had already seen more than the grand temples. There was more to register in the streets and public places of the city and he points to it:

²³ ... as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: 'To the unknown god.'

This picture shows an example of such an altar to an unknown God as recovered by archeology



So there's opening stating the obvious and leading to his point of engagement. With temples and shrines thick on the ground, Paul discerns a nagging awareness that there was still a god beyond all those thought to live in temples and called upon in shrines – an as yet unknown god. Despite all the investment in connecting with the depth of our existence and the spiritual world, Athens was really still searching. This is what he engages.

Paul's message in short: You are rightly looking for God but you look in the wrong places.

...I proclaim to you.²⁴

- The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by people,
- ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything,
- since he himself gives life and breath to all humanity and everything.
- ²⁹ Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, a material image formed by the art and imagination of people.

To make this really simple: Don't look for the creator God in the creations of people. This is Paul the Jew speaking against idolatry however elegant and subtle.

The most amazing architecture, the most sublime music, the most arresting art will not reveal the living God to you. These things are not all bad, but they are not God whom you seek.

Many Christians and churches have forgotten this whether it's with organs, choirs, rock bands, stage acts, liturgy or oratory. This is why I don't want church to be like a concert.

So, if you are looking for the living God, don't go to anything that people have made or think a certain place is where you will find him. All those stunning temples bring nothing! But some of you here in Athens already sense that and I am speaking to you.

Development

What does he say after that opening based on his observations?

His next point is that all people are made by God – All people! and we are all God’s children.

To say this he quotes some classic Greek poetry. He sings their songs to make his point once again witnessing to what is already stirring in their cultural consciousness and spiritual awareness all with a note of encouragement.

²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷ that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, ²⁸ for

“In him we live and move and have our being”;

as even some of your own poets have said,

“For we are indeed his offspring.”

Acts 17:26-28

²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷ that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, ²⁸ for

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Imagine hearing that you are God’s child as quoted from a favourite pop song or a children’s nursery rhyme. You are encouraged to seek this God hinted at by your own literature.

Meanwhile, we are now 182 words into his 267 word sermon as found in the ESV -or 68%) and Paul has made two points without yet getting to Jesus. He has only preached Old Testament themes and has 84 words left to make his gospel appeal. What is he going to say now?

Listen to what he does and does not say:

³⁰ The times of ignorance God overlooked,
That is ignorance of the true and unknown God being the Father of all.

Acts 17:30-31

³⁰ The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

I hear him saying,

- “Morality matters and God’s Judgement is coming.
- Ignorance of God’s claim on us is no longer an excuse.
- There is a righteous person appointed by the God you seek who has been raised from death who will judge all unrighteousness.”

I think Paul saves the biggest and most dramatic point until the very end saying this all hinges on someone God has already raised from the dead. I imagine him saying this as his time ran out.

He had read the culture and soul of the city:

- affirming what he could
- described its valid yearning for God
- referenced and quoted this back with affirmation in their own culture

Then he had spoken of:

- the need to repent of their ignorance before God’s coming judgement
- and mentioned the resurrection.

What had he not mentioned?

- The love of God
- The cross of Christ
- Heaven and Hell
- The Church
- God’s plan for your life
- Health wealth and prosperity
- ...?

Extra to what we heard today, Chapter 17 ends with a description of what happened next:

³²Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” ³³So Paul went out from their midst. ³⁴But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

The resurrection of the dead was the bomb!

Just as at Pentecost many scoffed but some were convicted and believed. How that works is a mystery.

Conclusion:

I have brought this as a study in evangelism of cultured pagans around us:

1. Study the people and their context. Know what they believe and where it fails them.
2. Affirm what you can.
3. Know some of their songs, poems and sayings. Find some material that expresses something of the Gospel already.
4. Whatever we say next, include the resurrection – even if in the very last sentence. That is the unanticipated and unique game changer.

Christ is Risen!