

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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This morning I'm going to preach on the New Testament lesson rather than on the Gospel. We've already addressed the *Farewell Discourse*, and today's reading is simply a continuation of that topic. So, I'd rather try to help us de-code the reading from Acts. It is well-known to us, but I doubt that it is fully understood.

To begin with, Paul, of course, as a devout Jew, was an impassioned monotheist. Here he is in Athens, a city noted for its philosophical schools as well as its commitment to Greco-Roman polytheism. Although Athens was no longer the political and economic center of the Hellenistic world, it continued as an intellectual center and undoubtedly for Luke was the epitome of pagan, Gentile thought." Thus, "this sermon is like no other in Acts, because Athens is a (particular) cultural context," one which defines its own outlines as a unique location.

"Paul's proclamation of the Christian message in this most famous of Greek cities represented a formidable challenge. He has just been forced out of two other major cities, but here he is greeted enthusiastically and invited to speak before the city council. Of course, they felt they had good reason to extend this invitation. However, the response of the Athenian philosophers of the day would not have encouraged Paul to expect an enthusiastic welcome. The *Epicureans* called him a "babbler," and the *Stoics* thought he was proclaiming 'foreign divinities.'" To preach here could be a dangerous business. Recall that Socrates was executed for corrupting the local population with strange new gods. As a Hellenistic Jew, Paul feels obligated to defend Christian thinking in front of very skeptical Athenians. Quite a task, but Paul is up to the challenge. His speech is a marvel of clarity and reason combined with humility and an understanding of the local context.

Some Athenians, listening to Paul, had misunderstood and concluded that he was promoting two new gods: *Jesus* and *Resurrection*. He needed to help them understand better what he was preaching. But he needed to do so without offending this proud group of Athenians with their ancient heritage of being the city most steeped in philosophy so that it served as a kind of tutor to the other Greek states.

He accomplishes this with skill. He begins with what resembles an argument based in natural theology which would appeal to their philosophical outlook. He does not dismiss their religious beliefs out of hand which would have been insulting. He says that he has noted how religious they are, pointing to an altar dedicated to "an unknown God." He can sympathize with this kind of pursuit of the holy. At the same time, his compliment is an implied criticism. He is not an Athenian. He is a Greek from the other side of the Aegean in what is now Turkey. And he is a Jew.

As he undertakes his job of trying to instruct his audience without turning them off, he “points out the weaknesses of popular idolatry” while relying on the insights of Greek philosophers to show that “some pagans have an understanding of God that contradicts idolatry.” He begins with an argument for the existence of God --- that his existence demonstrates the wonder of the natural world. But he conceptualizes God in a way that differs from the Athenian view in important ways. The God of the Jews is the Creator of all that exists in the world we know, but he “needs no shrines and transcends human imagination.” There is something about his description of God as the one “in whom we live and move and have our being” (an expression that owed its prominence to the fact that it was penned by *Epimenides*, an early Athenian philosopher --- an important insertion given his audience) that underscores the fact that “our very existence depends utterly and absolutely on God”. But he also charms them by saying that “we too are God’s offspring, created in his image.”

Such a claim would not be offensive because it acknowledges a shared understanding of one God; it’s just that for the Greeks, this one God is one among many. He is the greatest among them, but he is not supreme, and he is not a single exclusive being. He can live in the midst of many other gods. Luke, using Paul as the spokesperson, suggests that “all other philosophical or religious views do not have to be considered false in order to prove the gospel true.

But he proceeds to an attack on idolatry and its contrast with true worship. Since we are created in the likeness of God “no image made by a person’s skill and creativity can be anything but a distortion of the image of the one, true God. But by quoting a Greek philosopher in saying that “we too are his offspring,” he keeps them listening.

However, he goes on to provide a description of the view of the Jesus followers he represents and in whose name he is creating small religious communities throughout the Mediterranean basin. So, Paul preaches the need for “universal *repentance* from sin and repudiation of every pretender to the throne on which this God, the God of Israel, sits. And the world will be *judged* at a fixed time in the future.” He ends his sermon by announcing that “the time of ignorance is over” and (calls) for eschatological repentance. He is not, however, seeking to add a new god to the Athenian Pantheon; rather, he is seeking the Athenians’ repentance because “God will no longer ‘overlook’ ignorance of his will.”

If there was any ambiguity in his earlier remarks, it all but disappears here. There is, for example, the implication that the Athenian worship of an unknown god is emblematic of that ignorance. In the new age Paul is describing, there will be no tolerance for ignorance. The Athenians, after all, share in the universality of human sin, and by implication their ignorance is now willful rather than incidental.

This portion of his sermon is a climactic moment because mention of repentance, judgment and resurrection stirs the waters. The audience begins to divide up into those who scoff, those willing to hear more, and those who believe. In part, this division of opinion derives from Paul’s making reference to

Jesus of Nazareth. They do not object on grounds of the nature of the teaching of Jesus which “fits within basic Greek religious ideas.” They object purely on the basis of his being something so new and so unfamiliar that he threatens their own view of the world.

Much of what we’ve talked about here demonstrates Paul’s willingness to ‘become all things to all people’ in order to preach the gospel. It is a wonderful specimen of his approach to preaching to pagan Gentiles. He was more willing than the traditional Jesus followers in Jerusalem to alter the rules to make entry into Judaism an easier proposition. As he says in I Corinthians 9:22, “*To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.*” And this approach mirrors that of the first Jesuits to undertake missionary work in China in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. “Both Ricci and Ruggieri (Italian Jesuit priests who led the work) were determined to adapt to the religious qualities of the Chinese: Ruggieri to the common people, in whom **Buddhist** and **Taoist** elements predominated, and Ricci to the educated classes, where **Confucianism** prevailed. Ricci, who arrived at the age of 30 and spent the rest of his life in China, wrote to the Jesuit houses in Europe and called for priests – men who would not only be “*good*”, but also “*men of talent, since we are dealing here with a people both intelligent and learned.*”<sup>[7]</sup>

Paul’s speech in our gospel lesson today is sometimes criticized by Christians as lacking explicit citations in Scripture. However, his argument “is thoroughly grounded in the thought world of biblical Judaism” whether or not his listeners recognized this. In his audience were those who mocked Paul, those who promised to return to hear more, and those who actually joined his movement and believed. To achieve that kind of result takes a winning performance before an extremely critical audience. Thus, this passage gives us a unique perspective on the early church, not only its passion for promoting the love of God as expressed in the Incarnation but also its practicality in the face of the challenge of preaching a message that grew naturally out of Judaism but at this later point was more acceptable to a largely Gentile audience than to a Jewish one. This is a story from which we can benefit as followers of our Lord and Savior.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Sources:

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