

BIBLICAL REFLECTION

for Easter 6 (17 May)

Acts 17:22-31

In contrast to last week's extract from Acts, where the people reacted violently to the message of Stephen concerning Jesus, this week we see a much more nuanced approach to the revelation of early Christian identity. Our audience this time appears much more accepting and philosophically curious as to what the speaker is referring to. An added twist in the sequence of post-Easter readings from Acts is that last week this same speaker appeared in the story as one condoning Stephen's execution – now, he is a voice making similar proclamations. The complex story of Paul is for another time!

But what we do have this time is a simple – but profound – exposition of this 'New Way'; an explanation of the root from which it is hoped new thinking, practice and belief may stem, based around the character of one significant being: Christ. As with the whole *raison d'être* to the Book of Acts' existence, we see in a few verses yet another 'sales pitch' for this new religion, this new way of thinking, this new experience of the Living God; a God that the text implies has been *in situ* for some time, and had perhaps already begun to influence the hearts and minds of the people around. As Paul suggests, an altar to an "unknown god" may indeed be a key to a very definite capital-letter God.

We, of course, want this to be. As Christians, we read such a text as we have here, and we immediately feel OK with it. Of course this is who this altar is referring to, we might say. Of course our God reigns. Of course Paul is right. Why would anyone question such? Indeed, why would anyone want to?

Well, many have and do. Our modern world has continued the scenario found here in ancient Greece. We may well – like Paul – have the power of hindsight, but that has not stopped civilisation from confusing the picture of faith, and allowing endless debate and dissention. If Paul and his friends in the first-century had actually got it right – and perhaps, even, if God had dictated more forcefully – we would have had two thousand years of spiritual bliss, but we have not. Faith and its practices are as complex now as they ever were, and the jumble of philosophies create as many altars as can be invented, hence our societies are a mix of opinion, practice, rejection and doubt. Who actually is correct?

We cannot even stand up and say, "Christianity is correct, Christianity is the right way forward," because when we do, and we try to encourage non-believers to join us, we present them with a myriad of choices, too many choices perhaps. We replicate ancient Athens, and place 'altars' (in the form of endless denominations) on almost every street corner. Shall I be an Anglican? Shall I be a Methodist? What about dipping a toe in Roman Catholic? Could try Baptist, I suppose? And what about Latter Day Saints? It is little wonder that the 'philosophers' of our day choose alternative gods, be they other faiths, or just other practices and activities. The great lure of the gods of sport and shopping are never far away.

And when we are brave enough to proclaim that Anglicanism is by far the best religion out there, more confusion arises. Do we go for High Church or Low Church? Catholic or Evangelical? Formal liturgy or no liturgy at all? 'Novelty' worship (currently very popular!) or Solemnity? A utopian variety simply does not exist, and the many altars of Athens become a realisation for all time.

So, maybe we should return to the message that Paul is perhaps alluding to – a message that states that the 'unknown god' can become truly 'known' when eyes are opened, hearts are kindled, and minds are stimulated, rather than worry about labels, structures, or human choices dictating shape and form. Maybe the power in the discreet shrine to the 'unknown' lies beyond its provocative existence? Paul paints an ethereal picture that has no fixed edge, yet has focus. His view is all-embracing, yet intimate. His hope is universal, yet personal. His key is the Risen Christ. "Focus on him, and you cannot go wrong," appears to be the message. Some two thousand years later, such a message can easily be addressed far beyond the borders of Greece.

I, personally, rather like this ethereal message. As someone who, theologically, has never separated Christ or the Spirit from God, and sees all as one, I prefer the emphasis that Paul adopts today. True, in pure human form, there is indeed the physical Jesus, risen as He was from the grave, but Paul encountered a more ghostly form in his conversion experience in Damascus, working as Christ did through the influence of others at the time. In Athens, too, God works through others, through the images and thoughts and philosophical mutterings of the assembled crowd, stimulating and embracing each as the passage of understanding permeates through to them. Here comes revelation, not fixed within the confines of a shrine, but within the very souls gathered. Here is where evolution will occur. Here is where God is at large.

Here, today, within the souls of all who are gathered, reading this via the internet, or 'zooming' towards their God, or merely contemplating in the quiet of 'house arrest' – here is where God is supreme. The God who Paul reveals to the Athenians remains in our lives. We do not need shrines, altars and buildings – this 'lockdown' world has proved that – we simply need to want God, and allow His desire to want us to shine through. How we manage our faith after we have demolished our structures is for another time – but today's scripture challenges us to think about it. Paul was leading the Athenians to a potential new future – where might our "virus" God be leading us?

Fr. Ian