SERMON TRINITY 6 2021 STOWE

I understand that you have been following the story of how St Paul travelled through Asia Minor, now known as Turkey, crossed the Aegean Sea to Greece, then worked his way down Greece preaching, teaching, founding churches, and that success caused discord so he had to quickly leave several towns. I must ask for your indulgence if I repeat what other preachers have said already. Sometimes repetition is useful. Now we reach the moment described in our reading when he reached Athens, the intellectual centre of Greece but not the capital– that was Corinth.

The first sentence of our reading tells us something about how Paul operated. It begins:”*While Paul was waiting for them in Athens.*” If we read Acts uncritically, we might think that Paul was the only man; that he was the centre of action and operated alone. He was the leader, but this sentence tells us that he worked with a team and needed their support, their talents, their faith and their witness for his ministry to be successful. When Paul and team arrived in a town they had a well established routine. They started by talking to the Jewish community in that place because they were likely to understand the theology of what was being said. Jews worshipped the one God; but the general population worshipped a multitude of Gods who looked after different aspects of life. But trying to change Jewish understanding of God and His Messiah led to violent opposition. I’m sure that Paul wanted to succeed in Athens and recognised that his approach might need to be different. So he waited and watched what was happening around him. We’re told he started, as before in many towns, by talking in the synagogue to Jews and god-fearing Greeks. But he also debated in the market place and encountered Epicureans and Stoics (nothing to do with Stowe). Let me explain briefly what these sects believed.

Epicurus, teaching around 300 BC, believed that the greatest good was to seek modest, sustainable pleasure leading to tranquillity and freedom from fear. They promoted and enjoyed the good life and avoided pain and conflict. To do this, Epicureans generally withdrew from politics because it leads to frustrated ambitions. Epicureanism is a form of [hedonism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hedonism) but laid great emphasis on developing friendships. In modern usage an epicure is someone who loves the pleasure of good things, especially food.

Stoics, on the other hand, had a less indulgent attitude to life.  According to its teachings, as social beings, the path to happiness, or blessedness is found in accepting the moment as it presents itself, by not allowing oneself to be controlled by the desire for pleasure or by the fear of pain, by using one's mind to understand the world and to do one's part in nature's plan, and by working together and treating others fairly and justly. So they believed "[virtue](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virtue) is the only good" for human beings, and external things such as health, wealth, and pleasure—are not good or bad in themselves, but have value as "material for virtue to act upon". If you want to know more read Wikipedia on line.

So Paul, preaching about the one and only God whose Son lived, died and came to life again was contradicting the main philosophies of his time. But the ethos of Athens was very tolerant and accepting of alternative thinking – so he gained a hearing at the Areopagus. The Areopagus was and is a limestone outcrop about ½ mile from the Acropolis and was a place of justice and also for debate. Paul also must have listened to debates that were going on and made what he proclaimed as sympathetic to what the different factions believed as possible. As he roamed around Athens he noticed an altar “to an unknown God” – a sort of ‘get out of jail free’ god just in case there was a god who had been overlooked or forgotten and they didn’t want to upset.

So he started with this unknown god and identified him/her with the God who created everything. Paul’s God is not a tangible god made from gold or silver or stone, not a god who lived in the temples or in the sky, but a all powerful creator God who is interested in and involved in what happened in his world. Quote “For in him we live and move and have our being.” So far so good – what he said chimed with much of what they believed. He had to move on to more difficult ground and talk about Jesus’ life death and resurrection which was going to be hugely controversial. He had to convince this audience that the real God sat in judgement on all, that there was no way to be right with God except through Jesus who proved his truth by his death and resurrection. So he told them.

As ever, some people rejected what he said, others listened. Paul was invited to develop his pitch again and I don’t doubt he did so to the best of his ability. A few people were convinced and became Christians but of all the places he is recorded as visiting, Athens is the only one where he failed to found a Christian church.

All this is very interesting but how might it relate to us today? While I was thinking about what to say to you I read this article from the CMS magazine by Nigel Rooms and I think it has some good things to say and I’m going to quote directly from it. The article is headed “How to be caught being a Christian” and it seems to relate to what Paul was trying to do in Athens.

Nigel writes, One of the paradoxes of being a Christian in the Western world is that there is freedom of religion but it seems many Christians resist the idea of practising their faith in ways that can be observed publically. During the Enlightenment period from c. 1750 individual rational thinking became of the highest public value. The scientific method which claimed to be subjective reigned supreme. So facts, which can be proved by scientific method, came to be separated from values which can’t. Facts were allowable in public, values in private. Religious faith cannot be proven by scientific method so religion must be relegated to the private sphere, which is why you hear politicians say that religious people should not interfere in public matters.

With some notable exceptions the Christian Church in the West has given in to this social imaginary of how things are organised- faith is considered a private matter. This research shows that many congregations have quite high levels of individual and privatised spirituality within the boundaries of the church. However churches rarely act in public in the name of their church. Most Christians show their faith when they go to church but for the rest of the time it largely remains hidden. We are rarely caught out being Christian in public.

Rooms continues, I do not argue for forcing our faith to the surface in every conversation we have. That approach might work for some but comes across as false and overbearing. Somewhere between hiding our faith and imposing it on others is a way of being Christian that pays attention to what God is doing. God is always at work, creating a trustworthy world, always forming a loving and kind, gentle community.

In our world there are many forces at play that block our view of God. For example; how human behaviour is destroying our planet, how people are driven apart through nationalism and isolationism, how the bubblification of our lives prevent community since we stay within our chosen group of people who look like, think like and act like us.

He suggests that to overcome this we deliberately identify an area in which we can engage with our community, such as poverty or loneliness, and work to form relationships with others engaged in these activities outside the church and by our activities build relationships that explicitly demonstrate God at work in our lives. By God’s grace we hope what we do is recognised and identified with our faith in a loving God and that church grows – or an alternative church is formed.

Going back to our reading, Paul preached effectively but failed to break into the disengaged culture of Athens. He made a few converts but unlike other places he was not able to build a community of faith that had a wide spectrum of people in it who believed and were, mostly, willing to care for all those within the church.

We are called to do the same; to work individually and as a community to be engaged in our wider society, to show God’s love, to challenge the mindset that rejects Christian belief. And little by little we will play our part in building His Kingdom. Amen.