

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

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Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Acts 17: 16 - 33

“A Place full of Idols”

At the time Luke writes his Acts of the Apostles, the first century CE, the institutional religions of the Greco-Roman world had been in decline for a while. There was a general feeling that the old gods did not “fit” the modern world anymore and many people were exploring new spiritualities coming from a variety of religions and philosophies. The religious and spiritual marketplace was varied, colourful, and confusing, with connections and influences coming from as far afield as China in the east, Africa in the south and the Celtic tribes in the north.

Many people were, in a spiritual and religious sense, adrift and looking for meaning and answers.

There is one, rather funny story, involving the Areopagus and one of the philosophers quoted by Paul that illustrates this:

Once upon a time when the plague had come to Athens, no matter what sacrifices and prayers were offered to the gods, nothing made any difference. Assuming one or other god had been offended, or place desecrated unintentionally, the Athenians turned to the philosopher Epimedes for advice. He came up with a brilliant suggestion. They were to let loose a herd of hungry sheep and build an altar wherever one would lie down, sacrificing the sheep to the unknown god. Hungry sheep, he argued, won't lie down unless a god makes them or unless they discern they are on holy ground. He would know, Epimedes had been a shepherd before becoming a philosopher.

This story was, by the first century, considered myth. A funny story to tell your grandchildren on a cold night in front of the fire. But a story, a myth, most of the first readers of Luke's writings would have been familiar with. Especially because altars to “the unknown god” were found all over the Roman Empire. And they would also have known the famous poem this philosopher wrote called the Epimedian paradox, that went like this:

*They fashioned a tomb for thee, O holy and high one —
The Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies!
But thou art not dead: thou livest and abidest forever,
For in thee we live and move and have our being.*

The holy and high one of course being Zeus, and not Jesus should you for a minute have confused the two!

The famous philosophy schools of Athens, where Aristotle, Socrates, Plato and others had been the teachers, had also been in decline for a while. But the market places of Athens were still, throughout the ancient world, synonymous with intelligent discourse and profound wisdom.

The Areopagus was one of those market places. It was also a law court. The famous law court where Socrates had been sentenced to death for teaching “foreign deities and strange things”. After

listening to our reading this should sound familiar. But no, we are not talking about Paul here, or not yet.

(And not about Jesus either. Although Justin Martyr, a second century theologian would declare Socrates a Christian *avant la lettre* on the basis of his message about “foreign deities and strange things” and his martyr’s death).

You are probably starting to realise there is more to the background to this speech of Paul than simple geographical location. By the choice of his location and two short but famous quotes, Paul is put up there with Socrates, one of the greatest philosophers of all time. Paul meets Socrates’ successors in the same market place where he and other great men of wisdom had taught. The same place where a court had handed down the death sentence to Socrates for being, like Paul, a “proclaimer of foreign deities and strange things”.

Apart from connecting Paul to Socrates, and the grand tradition of greek philosophy in general, the content of the speech connects Paul to the popular Epicurean philosopher Epimedes, who initiated the erection of altars to the unknown god. Everyone knew his poem about Zeus’s immortality, as well as the writings of another popular philosopher, Aratus, who was a member of the other main philosophical school of the day, the stoics.

Following the rules of classic greek rhetoric in the structuring of his speech, Paul emerges as someone who could hold his own against the philosophers of the Athenian school since he was educated in their way of discourse and argumentation and familiar with their intellectual traditions. Both his teachers, Jesus and Socrates, suffered the injustice of a cruel court sentencing them to an undeserved death.

Now let us take another step back. From the background of the speech as it is portrayed in Acts, to the background of the book of Acts.

Acts is the story of the message of Jesus spreading like an oil spill through the Mediterranean. It is the story of the success of the gospel, of a Jewish sect finding its way and translating itself into the Greco-Roman world. It’s the story of Pentecost, of the Spirit unlocking the truth the Jewish people had possessed since the dawn of time. It was this that Jesus made available to the whole world. It is the story of an alternative Kingdom conquering the world with love, offering a peace deeper and more profound than the Pax Romana of the Roman Empire and a justice that was universal, for the whole world and every human being, independent of ethnicity, sex, status or wealth.

To tell this story Luke, in his two volume work, argues his case on two fronts: the Greek-Roman and the Jewish. To the Greeks and the Romans he says: The message we offer is not that different from the wisdom of your own philosophers and wise men. It does not undermine ordered society or a life of virtue. On the contrary.

On the Jewish front he connects his heroes, Jesus, Paul and others, to the prophets of old. Reaffirming the truth and validity of their messages, their lives, their way of preaching, and their tradition. At every turn the Hebrew Scriptures echo in the gospel of Luke and Acts. Indicating that the message of old, of justice and peace for all the nations, of God’s promise of healing and wholeness for all God’s people has become reality here and now in Jesus.

To those from a Jewish background Luke, in his writings, argues that Jesus has come to fulfill the Jewish scriptures, and in doing so he has come to fulfill God’s promises for the nations as the scriptures of old have promised. To those from a Greek background he connects his heroes and their

message to popular philosophy and teachers of high repute, as well as to their history and culture. Building bridges between the two fronts and leading them to a point where they converge to then take them into the future together.

It's not unlike an amalgamation!

And the story about Paul on the Areopagus is one excellent example of how Luke is doing this. His hero Paul connects to the philosophers and culture of the Greeks with words that, at every turn, echo with quotes from the Hebrew scriptures.

God the creator, in whom we live and move and have our being, whose offspring we are, the God of Jewish scripture, and your Zeus are the same thing. You, as well as every reasonable human being understands that God can't be limited to a shrine or a place of worship, or, I.o.I, be detected by stray sheep. Your philosophers have said that virtue comes from worshipping that all pervasive God, as have our prophets. Seek God and he will be found say the Jewish psalms, seek God and you will find say your philosophers. Idols are nothing. When the time comes for God to judge us we will be judged on virtue and true worship, not on random piety to unknown entities.

This God, our God, your God, has recently been revealed most fully in Jesus Christ. A man who was put to death, like many other messengers of truth over the ages. Your famous Socrates one of them. After Jesus' death however we discovered he was more than a messenger. He did not only teach the truth, he was the living, walking, talking, truth. A truth that could not be killed, or held in a tomb, in the same way you couldn't kill or hold Zeus in a tomb as that poem of your philosopher Epimedes testifies. In him we believe the divine came to live among us, bringing God closer to us, showing us whose offspring we truly are (as your other philosopher Aratus has said). Opening the door to an understanding of the divine that transcends all that was previously known and understood.

So, Paul finishes, let go of what has been superseded by this new reality and embrace the more profound truth revealed in Jesus Christ. Trust me, this does not do away or undermine your culture, your past, your beliefs, your religion, but reaffirms and fulfills it to take you into a deeper understanding of the divine, and a more profound relationship with it. It will give you access to a more perfect life of virtue and open the doors to a more meaningful relationship with God.

It is an impressive marketing exercise. By connecting to the different cultures and backgrounds of his audience Luke, through Paul, makes it possible for them to connect to his message and the hero of his story, Jesus Christ. Following their logic, citing their philosophers and prophets, he shows them a way forward to a faith and an understanding of life that is more satisfying and fulfilling. He does not dismiss their philosophies, religion, or prophecies. He just takes them a couple of levels further.

A small number join him after that. No great number, but we get the message: the oil spill keeps growing everywhere Paul goes.

A great and encouraging example of mission: going out to the nations, connecting to them wherever they are, and connecting to them at their level, to then find those who are ready and willing to become part of the Jesus movement.

Reading this story there is something that keeps bothering me though. Where do we fit into this picture? We who are so attached to our shrines and places of worship? For whom the material artifacts of our faith have become so important? We who keep Church, faith and the world "out there" often carefully separated? Who see idols everywhere around, but instead of engaging with the culture that worships them, turn in and retire into the bulwarks of our tradition? Who are often

more connected to the prophets and philosophers of our glorious past than to the future of a faith that proclaims that the divine Christ lived among us can't be killed or destroyed, but lives, connecting to people of every age with love, healing, justice and peace for the nations, wherever they may be?

Is it time for us to hear that message of Paul in Acts, trying to tease his audience away from what they know into a more meaningful and fulfilling future with Jesus Christ? Is it possible that we, set in our rituals and traditions, pious as we may be, are in fact the ones lost in a place full of idols?

Amen.