

## **HOMILY FOR SUNDAY 17<sup>TH</sup> MAY 2020**

**TEXTS: Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66:8-20; 1 Peter 3:13-22 & John 14:15-21**

One of his contemporaries described him as 'a man of little stature, thin-haired upon the head, crooked in the legs, of good state of body, with eyebrows joining, and nose somewhat hooked.' Obviously, the man so described is not going to win any prizes for beauty, but then in my books, beauty is of little account. However, he was one of the most important people in history. For the one so described is the apostle Paul. Perhaps the most important part of the description of Paul, that I didn't include earlier, is the concluding line, '(a man) full of grace: for sometimes he appeared like a man, and sometimes he had the face of an angel.'

The apostle Paul is the one who could claim to have done more than any other person throughout history to delineate, explain and spread the gospel. He founded many early church communities, and supported and guided many more. He undertook this missionary work through his preaching journeys across Asia Minor and into Europe; and by his letters to the early churches that were the earliest of Christian writings. These letters, became in time, the most authoritative and widely influential of Christian writings excepting, perhaps, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

As we read of his journeys, we cannot help but be impressed by his courage, determination, vigour, faithfulness, and one would have to say, a fair dose of pig-headedness. He undertakes long, arduous and often dangerous journeys, often on foot, into unknown territory where he has no friends or contacts to support him. He does this to preach a gospel message that will very often be rejected. He, and sometimes his companions, are often hounded out of town, sometimes thrown into jail, sometimes beaten up, and/or have their lives threatened. But he never gives up.

Instead, in each new town, Paul heads for the synagogue and begins to teach and preach the gospel to anyone who will listen. He is utterly dedicated to the proclamation of the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ.

By the time Paul reaches Athens, on what is often called his second missionary journey, he is by himself. His companions, Silas and Timothy, have stayed behind in Boerea (now Veria, Macedonia) after Paul had been sprinted away from his enemies by believers. Jews from Thessalonica had arrived in Boerea in pursuit of Paul, determined to stop him preaching. These Jews had stirred up a mob, threatening violence against Paul, and it seemed to the believers prudent that he leave. The believers conducted Paul to Athens, where he was to wait for Silas and Timothy.

Most people in Paul's situation would be glad of a break whilst they waited for their companions, but not Paul. For as he looked around the city of Athens, he was dismayed to see a vast number of idols, statues of gods, temples and other signs of pagan worship. These lined roads, adorned gateways, and were in all the prominent places. Some were crude phallic images, but others were sophisticated statues and temples. And there was a statue of the goddess Athena in the Parthenon that was so large that the gleaming tip of her spear could be seen from 65 km away.

Paul's heart was stirred and he could not keep silent, such was his passion for sharing the gospel and reaching out to those whom he believed were trapped in darkness. Now Paul was a well-educated man. He knew that the people worshipped the many gods these idols represented in an attempt to secure safe, prosperous and healthy lives. He knew that they would be upset to be told that their trust in these idols was futile.

Paul, out of his Jewish heritage, had been part of a people who had battled superstition and idolatry for many centuries. He knew both its futility and its resilience. He felt compelled to speak out against it and to proclaim the gospel not only in the synagogue, but also in the marketplace where the crowds gathered.

It is in the market place that he elicits a response, even if it is not altogether positive. Epicurean and Stoic philosophers begin to dispute with him. Epicureans believed that pleasure was the chief end of life, but that the only pleasure worth having was a life of tranquillity, free from pains, disturbing passions, and above all, superstitious fears. It tended to be the philosophy of the self-indulgent and the hedonist.

On the other hand, Stoics were devoted to reason and to virtue. They sought to be rational and self-sufficient, and laid great emphasis on endurance. They were indifferent to the material and to pleasure. They identified god with nature. In both cases, their ideas were quite incompatible with the gospel. However, Paul tries valiantly to share with them. Evidently, some of them struggle to understand Paul as they call him a 'babbling'.

But they do invite him to speak further at the court of Areopagus, showing some of the legendary Athenian curiosity. The court of Areopagus was a place where invited speakers could address an assembly of philosophers. For Paul, this was a tough audience as they were already committed to the beliefs inherent in their philosophies which were not compatible with the gospel.

I believe we can learn much from the way in which Paul seeks to reach out to them. He cannot use the Scriptures in the way he could with a Jewish audience, for this audience does not know the Scriptures (just like most modern day audiences). Instead he does his homework and seeks to start where they are, and does them the courtesy of treating their beliefs seriously. In doing this, he tries to get them enough on side so that they will at least hear him out.

His address is not without irony, for when he says, "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious," he does so whilst surrounded by statues of pagan gods! But he progresses quickly to a very bold proclamation – **that they worship the unknown, whilst he worships the known God**. He uses the fact that there are altars set up across Athens that are dedicated to the unknown god, to make this attestation. These altars were set up to ensure that no god was overlooked that might possibly harm the city if they felt neglected, because their model of worship was placation of the gods by sacrifices and worship.

Paul proclaims that it is the relationship of the Christian with God who has become known in Jesus Christ that is so different to the appeasement of the volatile pagan gods. He proclaims his message, moving from God as Creator, to the relationship of God to humanity, to the need for repentance and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In it his address he includes references to their culture, even quoting from a Stoic poet.

It raises for me questions about our approach to sharing the Gospel in our society. For there are many in our society for whom the Scriptures are no less foreign and as much unknown as they were for that Athenian audience. Quoting Scripture verses to people who do not value the Bible and see it as authoritative is likely to be ineffective as an evangelical tool. People today tend to pick and choose ideas and philosophies from a range of sources, finding what is congenial to them. They are very often reluctant to commit to one faith/religion and to accept its disciplines and demands. This has not been helped by the scandals that have engulfed sections of the Church, especially sexual crime against children.

And we need to be aware that many people today have no experience of worship, and will find coming to church quite intimidating as everything is quite foreign and may be difficult to understand and follow. The old tradition of sending children to Sunday school has largely gone, and with it the old forms of inculturation in Christian faith and traditions.

This means that we need to seek to find and try out new ways of connecting with children, families and adults and new ways of sharing the Gospel. And I know that many of you are trying to do just that with initiatives like Mainly Music, Play Groups and Friendship Club, and

the proposed Community Garden, Film nights, etc. As we do this, we will need to be prepared to make mistakes and not always achieve the kind of results we aspire to reaching. Sometimes things don't work out as well as we expect, but at other times they may well exceed our wildest dreams. We need to remember that even Paul, the great evangelist, did not always get received kindly. Nor did his preaching always result in conversions.

In Athens, his audience were divided in their responses to him, but most were negative. As could be expected, many sneered at his words, especially to his references to the resurrection as that was a doctrine rejected by the Epicureans. But some were prepared to hear more from him, and a few became believers. It was not his most successful preaching assignment, but he faithfully fulfilled his calling to proclaim Jesus Christ.

We are likewise called to be faithful to our calling to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are reminded of this calling at every baptismal service when we read these words from Matthew's Gospel, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Matthew 28:19-20

Jesus in today's reading from John's gospel reminds us that we do not do this by ourselves for we have One who will guide us in God's truth, the Holy Spirit.

The making of disciples is our challenge and goal. We must be open to God's Spirit and willing to answer the call. So, let us share with Paul the same sort of courage, determination, vigour, and faithfulness that was the hallmark of his ministry. And let us also learn from him a willingness to try to meet people where they are and find a way to connect to them and share with them the gospel.

God promises to provide all that we need. He even feeds us with his body and blood, reminding us that he spared nothing of himself to show us love and forgiveness. He has made us his precious children, and he longs for all people to know that love. So have faith and courage, and dare to dream of new ways to share God's love. Amen.

