

Contact

In the name of him who suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, dear friends in Christ: In this morning's first reading we catch up with the Apostle Paul as he arrives in the city of Athens in Greece. He's in the middle of his second missionary journey, which has taken him to many places that he never intended to go when he set out from Syrian Antioch with his companions almost a year earlier. But that's the way it goes in the Lord's service: his plans and purposes often far exceed our own.

As it happens, Paul is on his own when he comes to Athens. His team of four has split up for the time being in order to better serve the new churches they've planted in Macedonia. Athens is the agreed point of rendezvous for their missionary team. But Paul doesn't waste time waiting for the others to catch up with him to begin his work. As soon as he arrives, he begins to preach the good news of what God has done for sinners through Jesus Christ there.

A little about Athens: you may know it as the birthplace of democracy, which it was; but it was a form of democracy much more limited than we're used to. Only men could vote, and even then, it was only those men who were both free and who owned a certain amount of property. Slaves and landless freemen who made up the majority of the male citizens were excluded. Less well known is that the Athenians also invented ostracism. If there was somebody in the city you didn't like, say a political rival or fellow who just seemed to be getting too much power and influence, you could submit his name for a vote and if 6000 of your fellow citizens agreed with you, he'd be exiled from Athens for a period of ten years. And if ostracized, he had to go: no hearing, no appeal, no recourse whatsoever. Sometimes I wonder if introducing ostracism into our own political system might be an effective way to drain the swamp in Washington. Then again, we might soon run out of politicians altogether. And maybe that wouldn't be a bad thing ...

Getting back on topic, Athens was probably best known in the ancient world for its reputation of being the epicenter of human wisdom, science, and philosophy. It was the Ivy League of Ivy Leagues, attracting all the brightest and best scholars, teachers, and ambitious students. If you had an especially gifted son and enough money, you sent him to Athens to study. And after that, no matter where he was in the world, if he got into a scientific or philosophical argument with anyone, he could pull the trump card: "Oh yeah? Well, I studied in Athens." And everyone around would go, "Ooooh. This argument is over."

Paul, as we heard, was less impressed with the city's reputation for wisdom and knowledge. Oh, he would grant that it was wise in the way of the world; but that he saw as an obstacle to attaining the true wisdom which comes of God through saving faith in Jesus. No, what Paul saw as he surveyed this supposed capital of human wisdom was a city shrouded in pagan ignorance and superstition. More than anyplace he'd yet been, he found it full of temples, altars, and idols dedicated to the worship of false gods and goddesses – which is the height of human foolishness.

As was his usual custom when introducing the Gospel in a new place, Paul started at the local Jewish synagogue. There, he knew, were the people who had the background to understand what he was talking about. They believed in the one true God. They were versed in sacred Scripture. They knew Israel's history. And they were looking forward to the coming of

the promised Savior. All Paul had to do was to proclaim that the Savior they were looking for had already come in the person of Jesus. Sure, he'd have to explain that their false hope for an earthly resurrection of the kingdom of Israel was mistaken, but he could show that the salvation God actually accomplished through Jesus was far greater, for it included the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting. So, that's what Paul did on Saturdays when the Jews in Athens met for worship in the synagogue. We can infer from the text that he didn't have much success there.

The six other days of the week, Paul took his message to the open-air markets of Athens, preaching to anyone who would listen. And here, of course, he was dealing with a different crowd altogether. They had no background in Scripture. They recognized many gods and goddesses. According to their myths and legends, these gods had nothing to do with the creation of the world, nor were they the creators of humans. The idea of just one God and him being the creator of all things was a totally foreign concept. Even harder to understand was God's grace and purpose in creation. In the Greek religion, people existed to serve the gods. Through sacrifices one attempted to gain their favor. The true faith as Paul taught it was that in love God created humans in order to serve them. Hardest of all for the pagan population of Athens to grapple with, though, was the idea of the resurrection of the dead and life eternal. In the Greek thinking of the day there either was no afterlife at all, or if there was it was an only spiritual existence in a shadowy underworld.

Small wonder, then, that when some highly educated Epicurean and Stoic philosophers came across Paul in the market, they simply couldn't wrap their heads around what he was saying. They did recognize his teaching as something new. And that was enough to grant him a hearing, for as St. Luke (who wrote the book of Acts) tells us, the Athenians and foreigners living there practically lived to hear new things. Now, there's nothing wrong with being inquisitive and wanting to learn. These are good things. But I suspect that the real reason for their eagerness for novelty was that nothing they had heard to date satisfied them. Seeking wisdom and truth, they were filling themselves with foolishness and lies. And such things cannot bring peace, comfort, and satisfaction to the heart and mind of man.

And so, it is that after listening to Paul for a bit, these philosophers physically take hold of him and bring him to Mars Hill. It's a big step up from the market. Mars Hill is where the heavyweights of the academy gathered to share their ideas. Paul finds himself surrounded by what are regarded as the most intelligent and best educated men in the world. Just as significant is that they consider themselves to be the most intelligent and best educated men in the world. They are used to doing the teaching, not to being taught. They think they know everything already. There're some serious pride issues going on here. Most people would be intimidated to address such an august assembly. But not Paul. He knows that for all their supposedly enlightened wisdom, they are truly in the dark.

The question is how to reach them. Paul needs a point of contact, an entry way into their world of thinking that will give him an opening through which he can begin to shine the light of Christ. And it turns out that they have inadvertently given him one. Paul begins by commending the Athenians for their attentiveness to matters of religion, but then he gets to it: "As I passed along and observed your objects of worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: 'To the unknown god'."

What this altar was, we don't know for sure. It could be that for fear of offending a god they hadn't heard of and who might be miffed for being neglected, the Athenians set it up. Another possibility is that it was sort of the altar of last resort. When you tried to get your problem solved by offering gifts at the altars of all the other gods and it still wouldn't go away,

you could offer a sacrifice here hoping that some other god out there might hear you. Either way, the existence of this altar gave Paul the point of contact he needed. It was an admission by the Athenians that there was a god out there whom they did not know. Paul takes that opening and begins to pry it open wider.

“What you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it ...” Paul begins with creation: God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth. In so doing he establishes the true God’s lordship over all that he’s made. Recall that in the Greek way of thinking, the gods had their own areas of control or special functions: one ruled the sky, another the sea, another the underworld, and so on. Lesser deities controlled things like the sun, the moon, weather, fertility, what have you. By proclaiming one God the creator and Lord over all things, Paul effectively eliminates the need for all those other gods.

Paul moves from there to the idea of God’s grace and purpose in creation. This God, he says “being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.” Paul’s telling the Athenians that they’ve got it backwards. They think the gods need what we give them, that we can earn their favor by bringing them our offerings, which basically amount to groceries for their tables. Paul says no, God gives to satisfy our needs. The true God has no needs for us to satisfy.

Next Paul takes his discussion first to some indirect and then to some precisely targeted Law. The indirect Law is that God’s intent is that people seek him. This is what the curse on creation that came as a result of the fall is all about. God cursed the earth and made mankind subject to death and decay, to sickness and suffering, to thorns and thistles, and to hard toil precisely so that we would see our need for deliverance. Strictly speaking, we don’t seek or find God; rather he seeks and finds us. But by means of the curse the Lord prepares us to be found.

The more precisely targeted Law Paul proclaims to the Athenians addresses their idolatry. “Being God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.” This follows naturally from what he’s said. If God made us and provides for all our needs, it makes no sense to think that we ought to make and worship idols that represent him. He’s the creator. He made us. It’s offensive to think that we can make him or even images of him. Thus, Paul categorically condemns the Athenians for the city full of idols they worship.

And then he drops the hammer: “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness.” Paul is warning them. God’s judgment is coming. If you’re still worshipping idols when his judgment falls, it will fall hard on you. Now is the time to repent and to acknowledge the one true God.

Paul never quite gets around to preaching the Gospel in his message on Mars Hill. There’s no point in doing so until the Law does its work. You’ve got to see your need for a Savior before you’re ready to receive the salvation God sent in his Son. Sadly, it seems that the majority of the proud scholars who heard Paul speak that day proved resistant to the work of the Spirit to convict them of their sin. However, as the text goes on from what we heard today, we do know that a few of them followed Paul wanting to hear more, and later some of them did become believers in Jesus.

And let me clarify: though Paul does not explicitly preach the Gospel on Mars Hill, he does hint at it when he mentions that the one whom God has appointed to judge the earth is a man whom he raised from the dead. Paul says that's the assurance of his appointment by God. It's also a second point of contact with the worldly-wise Athenians. Their altar to the unknown god gave Paul the opening he needed. But in closing his message with the mention of Christ's resurrection, Paul puts his finger on what is the ultimate human problem. It's death. It comes to all of us. No matter how wise or well educated you are or may become, you can't escape it. And because it's part of the curse, we know that death is not good. We fear it, and rightly so. So in speaking of the resurrection of Jesus, Paul suggests to his hearers that there is a way to overcome death. And that offers them hope – a hope that can be fulfilled by knowing and trusting in the fullness of the Gospel. In this way I think Paul was baiting the hook for his hearers.

All of this is important for us because Paul's discourse on Mars Hill is a case study for evangelizing those who may be highly educated (or at least imagine themselves to be so) but who have little or no knowledge of biblical truth. And that describes a large and fast-growing segment of the society in which we live. We Americans as a whole like to think that we know everything, but most are almost biblically illiterate. So, how do we reach them?

From Paul we learn to be respectful but firm in our assertions. A popular idea in evangelism today is that in order to reach the world, the church needs to become more like the world. But note that Paul does not water down his message for fear of offending, nor does he engage in cultural accommodation. He doesn't change the message to fit the audience; but he does look for a way in, a point of contact, something his hearers recognize and agree with, and he begins the conversation there. And we can do that. A point of contact could be almost anything: a family relationship, a friendship, a shared interest, a professional connection; it really makes no difference. It's whatever provides an opening to being heard.

Paul also shows us that he is not driven by results. He's not keeping score of how many converts he wins each day. He simply proclaims the truth and lets God do the work of conversion in those whom he is pleased to receive into his kingdom.

Finally, and most importantly, Paul shows us that it all comes down to the resurrection of Jesus. That's the truth on which the Christian faith stands or falls. Because if it's not true that Jesus rose from the dead, then our faith is in vain and we have no hope in the world. But if it is true – and it is – then Jesus has solved the biggest and most frightening problem that every human being on the planet faces. It's a contact that everyone can relate to. And hearing of how Jesus defeated death and why he did it is what assures of the forgiveness of sin, grants peace, and opens the gate of eternal life to all who receive these truths in faith. Therefore, in our own conversations with those who are spiritually in the dark, may we contact them with these truths that matter most. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!