

Acts 17-16-32

I should think all of us have been tourists at one time or another. I wonder which countries and cities you have been to – Berlin, New York, Dublin, Geneva, where have you been?

And then why did you go – was it to see the sights, shopping, a bit of culture, or just to relax and perhaps sit by a river and fish?

I'm sure most of us have had the experience of wandering for the first time round a city, perhaps with map in hand. Think of it for a moment, think of a city you have been to. What strikes you about the place? Is it the architecture, the traffic, the tranquillity, the people, the beauty? Then consider what pleases you about the city what do you like about the city and what do you dislike?

This morning on our Mission Sunday we join Paul on his travels as we did more fully in the summer. Paul was in Athens and he must have been struck by the architecture, the acropolis, the Parthenon and the agora. There was so much to like about Athens. However the passage in v16 says he was "greatly distressed" – or provoked in his spirit. He felt deep inside that things were not right and what he saw upset him. What he saw was a plethora of idols. The best way of describing it was the city was submerged in idols. Indeed one Roman satirist said "it was easier to find a god there than a man." Now many would say that this was commendable because it meant there was on offer a range of creeds and philosophies. However to Paul the Christian it upset him because he knew through his personal relationship with God in Jesus Christ that there was something so much better which these people as yet had not heard about.

He saw these people floundering about in a sea of shrines and altars and idols without knowing the lifebelt that God the Father had given to all people in Jesus Christ.

If Paul were to stand in one of our cities today and look around he would see the same. He would see Temples to idols but not quite the same. There he would see the temples to money, to materialism, to sex, to the body. Now we may not see these as idols but when we think of the time, energy and money that people pour into these things and the hold they have on their lives we can see these are the idols of our day. These are the things we seek in order to gain satisfaction and meaning for our lives. Again Paul would be distressed because he would want to say now as then there is a better way and it is in Jesus Christ.

So he set about telling these people of God's love for them in Jesus Christ- he set about telling them the good news, the gospel message.

In the same way in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian missionaries came to the islands we know today as Papua New Guinea with the message of God's love and the church has grown so that at the 2000 census 96% of the population identified themselves as members of a Christian church.

So what was it that Paul had to say to the people in that city with its plethora of idols?

Well I am afraid that here Paul let's us down, especially those who like a nice clear logical pattern to things because he doesn't give us that but he does give us a series of statements about God as we see him in Jesus that fitted those who he was speaking to in Athens but which speak to us down the centuries.

Firstly he explains to these Athenians that God is

### **Known not unknown**

It would seem the thing that really got to Paul as we see in v23 was the fact that in Athens there was an altar to 'The unknown God'. Just in case there was some God they didn't know about they had this altar because they didn't want to upset or offend this unknown God. But in reality with all their shrines and temples what Paul could see was that they didn't know God at all and much of what he goes onto say about God not needing a house to live in or the food they could offer to keep him alive showed that they didn't know God. As Paul goes on to say in v30 in the past God overlooked such ignorance but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.

So what has happened to change the situation? Into the world has come a rescuer, God's son Jesus Christ. As the writer of the letter to the Hebrews tells us, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word." (Heb 1:3) Jesus has made God known to us. In Jesus Christ God has come to earth and shown us what he is like, his character nature and love. If you want to know God you need to look at Jesus.

Then note what Paul said in v30 was "he commands all people everywhere to repent". Paul's message was given in Athens but is applicable to people in every country in every age. The death of Jesus through which we can know forgiveness of sin and a new start with God is valid for all people in every age. That is why people took the message of God's love to the people of Papua New Guinea. That is why just this week Michael Sata the new President of Zambia said to the Archbishop of Canterbury when he visited "send us more missionaries" with the rider "What we get on Sunday is not adequate to sustain the Church. We have several good outpost missions without trained or ordained priests."

People everywhere need to know that in Jesus we can know God.

In our own day we have shown that we don't know God. We worship at so many shrines, - the gym, the home, the bank, the shops, even the office - don't get me wrong there is nothing wrong with keeping fit or having money or working but when these things become our goals and we live for them then they have become our god and then we need to repent. We need to have a change of mind which allows God to be first in our lives. Paul goes on in the speech to explain some of the reasons why God should rule in our lives

Secondly Paul explained to these Athenians that God is

### **Creator not created**

These Athenians had built so many places for their gods to live in and they dusted their gods down and brought them food but Paul said the reality is this, follow me as we read vs 24-25, "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else." God is the creator and sustainer of life.

I seem to remember a few years back Rosie and Vicki Foster bringing their guinea pigs to church and me using them as an illustration and it does illustrate what Paul was saying here. Rosie and Vicki had bought a nice hutch for them to live in. I'm sure they fed them and cleaned them out and did all that is necessary for them to be well. The reality with the guinea pigs was that Rosie and Vicki were in control, not the pigs. The reality in Athens was that the people were in control and the gods were really nothing. Yet the truth is just the opposite that actually it is not us but God who is in control. He is the creator and yet so often we want to be in control. So often I have heard people say "I like to think of God like..." One young girl once wrote "I like to think of God in heaven as a very old man with a very long beard which curls up at the end and I could sit in his beard and be warm and safe." That is making God in our own image not accepting we are made in his!

The reason the good news of Jesus is relevant for all people in all ages be they Athens in the first century, Papua New Guinea in the 19<sup>th</sup> or you and I in the 21<sup>st</sup> is that it is God who has made us. However for some of us we may say well so what? Mr Dyson made my Hoover but I'm the one who uses it. Ford made my car but I drive it. God may have made me but I live my own life.

So thirdly we need to note that Paul explained to these Athenians that God is

### **Involved not remote**

We can see this in vs 26-27 "From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us."

He is not far from us he wants us to reach out to him. God is not the celestial watchmaker who has set the world going and opted out. He is actively involved in his world through the power of his holy Spirit and in response to our prayer. As Michael Duncalfe flies his plane across the mountains of Papua New Guinea ferrying people to hospital or supplies to those in need he is God's ambassador bringing God's help and care where it is needed.

But it is not just those people that God wants to be close to. He wants each one of us to reach out to him and know him as creator and God because as Paul explained to these Athenians it is about

### **Relationship not religion**

This is the nub of the issue for these people in Athens and through the centuries to us today. The Christian faith is all about relationship, the relationship between us and God and the starting point of that relationship is when we recognise he is God and we are his creatures, his people. He has made the world and he has made us not the other way round. He is God but he is not cut off from us. Rather he wants to be involved in our lives and we can have a relationship with him. The relationship is possible because we can know God through Jesus and know that in Jesus we are valued loved and accepted. This is true whether we are in Athens , Papua New Guinea or China and whether we live in the 1<sup>st</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century.

So friends today if you are not a follower of Jesus Christ if you don't know God then **REPENT** of the fact that you have not allowed God to be God in your life and ask him to forgive you and restore you as his child.

But if as with many here you do know God and are in that living relationship with him can I suggest two things for us out of what we read in God's word here?

**REPEAT** – that is have the same heart as Paul and repeat his concern for people in our own day. It does matter that people don't know God. It does matter that people don't see what God has done for them in Jesus. It matters not because we want bigger churches but because people's eternal destiny is riding on it. As we see in v31 God has "set a day when he will judge the world with justice". We should not be indifferent to the situation of friends who do not know God they matter to God and to us.

**RESPOND** – we are like Paul to be those who carry the message with us and, because there are many places we can't go, who support with prayer and giving people like Michael and Nicki Duncalfe as they seek to take the message of God and his love to Papua New Guinea.

Perhaps next time you take a trip and walk round a city have a look and see the kind of gods that are being worshipped and pray for that city that people will know the living God who has revealed himself in Jesus who is God of all and who longs that all people everywhere will know and serve him.