

The Speech at the Areopagus

Today's story is a gold mine for church and Greco-Roman history geeks. I know that there are varying degrees of interest in historical stuff in here...some of us read history for fun. Others would rather have a colonoscopy,

But a little bit of the history will be helpful here because the culture in ancient Athens has some helpful parallels to our own time.

Athens, and all of Greece by the time of Jesus and Paul, was a part of the Roman Empire. But under Alexander the Great it was its own vast empire. It occupied most of the Mediterranean region and the Middle East.

It became more fragmented in the centuries after Alexander's death. Later on, through a series of conquests and annexations, it all became part of the Roman Empire.

The city of Athens, among others, revolted against the Roman Empire in 86 BCE, but it was crushed, and the city was sacked. Greece remained part of the Roman Empire.

However, the dominant culture remained Greek. And through its government systems, educational system, and philosophical schools, that culture had a powerful impact on Roman culture and therefore on all of western culture, including our own nation.

That culture is classically shown in this passage.

Athens was the cultural and intellectual center of ancient Greece. If you've ever read about the ancient Greek philosophers, you know that dialog and arguments in the public marketplaces – the agora – were a staple of the Greek lifestyle.

Ordinary people who fancied philosophical debate apparently watched and added their own two cents worth. Paul himself is believed to have been trained in the rhetoric of Greek debate.

By the time Paul enters the Greek world, Plato and Aristotle were long dead, but their schools of thought would have continued. It is apparently the Epicureans and the Stoics who had the popular philosophies of the day.

So, Paul jumps into the intellectual and philosophical fray in the agora with his claim about Jesus' death and resurrection.

This gets him a trip to the Areopagus.

The Areopagus was a rocky hill where there was a court. It was used for criminal trials, but also to settle disputes and investigate religious claims. Apparently, he's taken there because of the concern that he is touting foreign gods.

Areopagus means hill of Ares. It was named after the Greek god of war. The Romans called it Mars Hill because the Roman god of war was Mars. You'll often hear Paul's sermon here called the sermon at Mars Hill.

So, what could this all possibly have to do with the situation in which the Christian church finds itself in the 21st Century?

Well, like first Century Athens, we have a very diverse religious, spiritual, and cultural landscape. Like First Century Athens, we have lots of skeptics and cynics who love a good debate – whether they really know anything or not.

We have frank unbelievers and we have the spiritual but not religious people. We have Christians and Muslims and Hindus and Jews and Buddhists and B'hais. We have Native American spirituality. We have pagans and Wiccans.

And we do have idols. Many of our idols we might not think are the same thing as those of Athens, but they're pretty close. That's a whole other sermon.

We as followers of Jesus are in the same dilemma as Paul. The foundation of our faith is based on the impossible claim that Jesus was crucified by Rome in collusion with Jewish religious authorities but was then raised from the dead.

And yet that's what we proclaim...every Sunday. It's what Christians are called to proclaim...Christ crucified and risen. I don't know if there will ever be a time when the chief reaction to that isn't scorn.

But Paul does something that leaves at least some of the Athenians wondering if it could be true. Sometimes, that's really the best we can do.

Paul meets them where they are. He understands a little about the culture he's swimming in. He's able to quote a Greek poet.

But I think the most important thing he does is affirm their spirituality. He latches on to this unknown god and leads them into the possibility that this unknown god could be the God of Jesus.

And then he just tells the story. It's not up to him to force them to believe it. He challenges their idolatry, but he doesn't condemn them for it, nor does he tell them God does.

So I think there's something here for us as we try to proclaim the good news of Jesus for our own time and place. Maybe you've already thought to yourself that this sort of proclamation will be even harder for us than it was for Paul.

While there still are preachers who show up in the public spaces, their message is too often not the actual good news. They're often more effective at turning people away from Christianity than getting people to become disciples.

The whole branch of evangelism that focuses more on hell than the actual message of Jesus has poisoned the waters for proclamation that might actually lead people to want to hear more.

In the centuries since Paul's Mars Hill sermon, we've also had to wrestle with the Enlightenment and the vast increase in scientific knowledge of the origins of the universe. We've had to contend with the church's often less than helpful response to that.

The church's motives and proclamation have sometimes been more self-serving than serving God.

All that makes it harder for us, but it doesn't let us off the hook.

What does help us is that we also live in this remarkable post-Enlightenment time when spirituality is actually on the rise. The whole world of the spiritual but not religious crowd is seeking something that might have some similarity to the Unknown god – like that of the Athenians.

Is it possible that this unknown god is really God's Holy Spirit hovering in and around all the other spiritualities in our culture?

I think that's what gets me excited when I read about spirituality in its different forms. I think that sometimes when Christians say that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life they get too fixated on a pretty narrow way of understanding that.

Perhaps Jesus is a way bigger way, truth and life than we can even imagine. And perhaps the Holy Spirit refuses to be confined to a space that's only as big as our understanding.

We can and should tell our story...the story of Jesus and his death and resurrection to bring healing and renewal to all creation. We can tell our own stories of transformation and growth that we believe our faith in Christ has brought to us.

But can we listen to other stories too? Can we ourselves be open to the possibility that the God we worship might be a whole lot bigger than the box we put God into? Can we trust that when Jesus died and rose to save the world, it really somehow meant all the world?

And can we live with doubt – both our own doubt and that of others? After all, resurrection is pretty hard to believe...it's probably ok to cut people some slack if they can't quite get there.

Doubt can actually be a springboard to a deeper faith...a faith that isn't satisfied with easy, pat answers, but which is willing to sit with us in times when we doubt everything.

The story we tell is a huge story...death and resurrection. But we can point to it everywhere...in the cycles of the seasons, in the cycles of life and death in nature, the birth and death and rebirth of stars in the heavens, the new life we've experienced after a death-like experience.

Many spiritualities have always been able to see this pattern of death and resurrection woven into the very being of creation. Maybe that's what inspired the Unknown God of Athens...a sense that underneath it all, there is something beyond us...a god in which we live and move and have our being...a sense that creation is being drawn ever towards new life.

Maybe that sense that the concrete world we can see and manipulate isn't all there is lies behind the Unknown god...in Athens and in our own time.

We can't force anyone to believe what we believe, or really even try to convince them, especially if we approach it with a sense of superiority.

But we can meet people where they are. We can listen with love and no judgment. We can point to the cycles of death and resurrection in creation...in nature...in our own lives.

And we can trust that the work of the Holy Spirit goes beyond and deeper than anything we can possibly understand.