

Year A
6 Easter
Acts 17:22-31
Psalm 66:7-18
1 Peter 3:13-22
John 14:15-21

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Since it's still the Easter season, you'll notice we have another reading from the Acts of the Apostles this morning, instead of an Old Testament reading. Here we see Paul speaking to the Athenians in their Areopagus, which was the main Roman court in Athens. Just before this passage Luke says that Paul had been very distressed about the number of idols in Athens, and had been preaching in the marketplaces, and debating with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, trying to share the good news about Jesus. These philosophers have now taken Paul to the court so that he could debate with them.

For educated readers of Luke's time, having Paul defending his theology in the Areopagus, especially with Greek philosophers, would make them think of the philosopher Socrates, and *his* famous trial in the Areopagus more than 400 years before. Like Paul, Socrates was also accused of preaching about foreign gods (among other things), and he was sentenced to death for it. So for Paul to be in this location, with these philosophers (even though it's not clear that he is being legally accused of anything) provides an anxious setting. A few weeks earlier, Paul had already been flogged and imprisoned in Philippi—will he now be jailed in Athens?

But no, he isn't, because Paul very cleverly uses tactics that the Christian Church has always used to make people more comfortable with the message of Jesus. He is sensitive to Athenian culture, and casts his story in terms of their beliefs. Instead of saying, "I can't believe how many dumb idols you people have in your city," he praises them for being extremely religious in every way. And he had noticed that there was even a statue erected "to an unknown god," so that the people of Athens could cover all their bets, and not offend anyone's deity. Paul seizes on this idol, and says the god is not unknown, but is the God who created all things, and has no need of shrines, because he "is that in which we live, and move, and have our being." Ironically, in quoting this phrase, Paul is quoting Greek philosophy, not Jewish scripture. In saying that God is immanent, permanently pervading and sustaining the universe, Paul uses their own philosophy to describe God.

This approach of using a culture's theology and traditions to describe the nature of God is one that continued to be used—and continues to this day. Syncretism is the technical word for it. For instance, in the early Middle Ages, as Christianity began to move into areas where people worshiped at magic springs of water, or in holy groves of trees, the monks and nuns would acknowledge the holiness of these things. Then they would build a church nearby, and dedicate the the spring to a saint, or the grove of trees to the Holy Spirit. Doing that made it easy for

people to continue to worship in their familiar places, and made it easier for Christianity to gain traction in a new place. Traditional pagan practices would also be rehabilitated and folded into Christian celebrations. For instance, holly and other evergreens are traditional symbols in the winter solstice worship of many ancient European pagan cultures. Christians were happy to incorporate them as Christmas trees, and other seasonal decorations.

Even today we do this. A colleague of mine was ministering to people in Panama who had been headhunters. Now, as followers of Jesus, they no longer practiced headhunting, and they had been working to keep peace among their various tribes. My friend specializes in helping people create their worship, incorporating tunes and wording that make the liturgy especially meaningful for them. For instance, he said that in writing a song for the offertory, they used a tune that had been traditionally used when the warriors would bring the heads of their enemies to lay at the feet of their chief. Now that tune, as a part of their liturgy, has very different words.

So Paul is being very savvy in preaching to the Athenians, using their tradition of “the unknown god,” and quoting from their own philosophers to describe his experience of God’s grace. He doesn’t attack them, he listens, and he learns about what is important. And not only is he not arrested, he is successful in his evangelism. Our lectionary doesn’t include the information just after this passage that “some of them joined him and became believers.”

Today we still have the opportunity to reach out to people who might be skeptical about the Good News. We’re finding new ways of doing that, whether through social media, or through taking worship to people in the park. What, exactly, new ways look like for our congregation is still taking shape. If you have ideas, let me know.

And some of the old ways still seem to be reaching people. Episcopalians traditionally seem to be a bit allergic to the idea of evangelism, but I’m not talking about going door to door, or standing in front of the Locke Store shouting scripture passages. Like Paul, you can be more savvy than that. Actually, you *are* being more savvy than that. Some of you have invited friends to come to church with you. That is a wonderful way to share the message. Actually, that is the way most people find a church. So keep asking friends to come here. And when you see an unfamiliar person, here, greet them! More and more visitors are checking out Christ Church Millwood, so show them how friendly we really are. And then listen—that’s extremely important. Hear about what matters to them. What brought them here? How can we meet them where they are, and support them? And welcome them in Jesus’ name.

Amen.

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