

To the unknown god

Acts 17:1-34,

One of the scariest things I do in my role as a pastor is stand up here in front of you. Not that you are scary, in fact you are all lovely, well most of you! What is scary is the responsibility of preaching the word of God. I have this underlying conviction that a sermon should be worth the congregation's time. I, and I know each of our regular preachers here at OBC, work hard to provide messages that are well-constructed, well-illustrated, packed with Biblical truth and hopefully inspired by God.

There is this expectation, and it is a fair expectation, that we will share God's word with you, and I have the responsibility to do that in a way that encourages you, inspires you, helps you, motivates you, comforts you, disciplines you, matures you, teaches you and yes entertains you, not in the sense of frivolity, but just enough to ensure you keep listening. That responsibility is scary.

There are times it goes well and I feel like doing a victory lap, high fiving people like an Olympian (that might be overstating it a bit, preachers have a habit of doing that), and there are other times that I want to slink out of the building, preferably under the carpet so I don't need to talk to anyone (that's not overstating it). More often than not, it is a quiet prayer that goes something like, 'Lord I have done my best, can you please do something with it'.

Well, this morning I'm going to cheat a bit, because I am going to preach one of Paul's sermons, a sermon he preached in Athens. It's recorded in the 17th chapter of the book of Acts and if you don't like it, don't blame me, have a go at Paul. We have been going through Acts for most of this year and we are up to Acts 17.

Background (show map)

Now, to fully understand the message of this sermon we need to do a bit of a review so that we can get the context in our mind. This is Paul's second missionary journey starting from Antioch. The whole trip is about the equivalent to walking from Cape Reinga to Bluff and back. Last week David was showing us various ways that Paul and Silas was being 'led by the spirit' when eventually they were led into Philippi and into jail, I'm not sure that was part of the plan. In the last half of Acts 16 we are told that when the magistrates in the

city of Philippi learned that he and Silas were Roman citizens, they apologized for the way they had been treated, released them, but still begged Paul and Silas to leave the city so as not to cause any further disturbance. And that's what they did - they left.

This brings us to chapter 17 and verse one tells us they arrived at the capital city of Thessalonica, which was about 160 km away. When they arrived, Paul followed his typical church-starting modus operandi and we read from verse 2

²As was Paul's custom, he went to the synagogue service, and for three Sabbaths in a row he used the Scriptures to reason with the people. ³He explained the prophecies and proved that the Messiah must suffer and rise from the dead. He said, "This Jesus I'm telling you about is the Messiah."

And this tactic worked. Look at verse 4,

⁴Some of the Jews who listened were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with many God-fearing Greek men and quite a few prominent women.

⁵But some of the Jews were jealous, so they gathered some troublemakers (worthless bums) from the marketplace to form a mob and start a riot. They attacked the home of Jason, searching for Paul and Silas so they could drag them out to the crowd. ⁶Not finding them there, they dragged out Jason and some of the other believers instead and took them before the city council. "Paul and Silas have caused trouble all over the world," they shouted, "and now they are here disturbing our city, too."

We are then told in verse 10 that the church moved Paul and Silas on, but before they "leave" Thessalonica look at verse 6 because it lists the exact wording of the charges that were made against Paul and Silas. The leaders of this mob said, "Paul and Silas have caused trouble all over the world and now they are here disturbing our city, too."

I wonder if we Christians today have become a bit too 'nice'. How long since we have been accused of causing trouble all over the world? The literal Greek translation would read something like this, "These men have been going around turning the world upside down." How cool would that be to have that said about you as you challenge people about what they believe.

And that has been our role for the past 2,000 years, to turn the world upside down.

- Where there is darkness, we bring light.
- Where there is hatred, we bring love.
- Where there is anxiety, we bring a peace that passes understanding.
- Where there is sadness, we bring laughter.
- Where there is bondage, we bring freedom.
- Where there is fear of death, we bring the good news of eternal life.

That is how we turn the world upside down. Not in the way ISIS is doing it..., nor in the way the Christian crusades tried way back..., but like Jesus... and Christians like you and me are still called to do the same thing.

Let's face it, it doesn't feel like we are winning at all. When we look at some of the messes both here in NZ and around the world, where do we start?

We start by sharing the good news of the Gospel one person at a time. We don't have the responsibility of changing the world, just to help people take one step closer to Jesus. Because the only way to 'right the world' is to 'right the human heart' and the only way to right the human heart is to invite Jesus into it!

Berea

Well, as I said, this Jewish mob was angry over Paul and Silas upsetting their world so they forced them to leave Thessalonica, and Paul and Silas' next stop was the little village of Berea. When they arrived, once again Paul went to the synagogue-and used the Old Testament Scriptures to help them understand the good news of Jesus' coming. And these Bereans were wonderful because they had already accepted the Scriptures as authoritative, which made it easier for them to see that Jesus was indeed the Messiah.

Things were going great guns in Berea-until the Jews who had opposed Paul in Thessalonica showed up. They had apparently followed him and quickly stirred up a "lynch mob" similar to the one in Thessalonica such that Paul was forced to leave town again and this time he headed for Athens.

Athens

Once Paul arrived and got settled, he did what you and I would probably do. He took a little sight-seeing tour of this world-famous city. I'm sure that even

then tourism was big in Athens because it was a city that was unsurpassed in sculpture and architecture. It boasted a sixty-thousand seat stadium. Art galleries existed in abundance. Athens was past her best at that time but it still stood as the cultural centre of the entire Greek world. Wealthy families from around the world still sent their children to Athens to study. This was a university city - this had been the home of Socrates, Aristotle, and Plato.

Well, I'm sure Paul took all this in - he was well educated and would have been thrilled by the mind-challenging educational atmosphere of Athens. But the thing he noticed the most as he walked the streets was that there were idols everywhere he looked. In fact, it has been repeatedly said that it was easier to find a "god" than a man in Athens.

These idols showed him that the men and women of Athens had a great capacity for God. They knew there was something beyond man, and they were seeking it. But they were seeking it in the wrong place!

Well, as Paul took all this in, God began to plant the outline of a message, a word from God in his heart. During his walks through the city, God helped him see exactly what these people needed to hear. Paul practiced in the synagogue. Then he further honed it by literally taking his message to the street, discussing his views with Athenians in the marketplace.

This does not mean that we should all do street witnessing, Paul spent time understanding the culture and looked for ways that were appropriate because in Athens that is what people did for fun. verse 21 says,

"All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas."

These Greeks loved to discuss things so Paul's street corner sermonettes were welcome.

Epicureans and Stoics verses 18-21

Through these "on the street" interviews Paul met the two main philosophical groups of that city - the Epicureans and the Stoics.

- The Epicureans believed that the chief end of man was pleasure and the avoidance of pain. They did not deny the existence of gods but taught that the gods did not involve themselves in the affairs of man. They also believed that at death the body and soul dissolved, there was no after-

life. This was the “eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die” crowd, if it feels good do it - if it feels bad don’t do it. I don’t know about you...but I think the epicurean philosophy is still alive and well today in our pleasure-worshiping, pain-avoiding culture!

- Now, the other group - the Stoics - were pantheists. They taught that everything is god - the stones - the trees - the birds in the air - you, me- everything. They were the opposite of the Epicureans because they were fatalists who believed that life is filled with unavoidable good and bad, the best we can do is grin and bear it.

The epicurean said, “Enjoy life” and the stoics said, “Endure life.”

Well, try to imagine these two proud groups in the marketplace, listening to Paul talk. Picture these philosophers’ in their robes, stroking their beards as they sized him up, “kicking the tires” of his new teaching.

Luke tells us that, after listening a bit, some of them shook their heads and called him a “babblor” v18. This word is literally translated “seed picker” and it referred to scavenger birds who went around pecking at seed and food scraps that had fallen on the streets of the market. These guys thought of Paul as a mere collector of fragments of truth, someone who was not really educated. It was their judgement that he had just scavenged a few choice words from philosophies that he had picked up along the way and used these words to try and impress people.

But others thought it would be interesting to hear what Paul had to say, so they decided to give him a formal hearing before the council in Athens that had the responsibility for supervising education in the city and controlling the many itinerant lecturers passing through. Paul accepted their invitation. I’m sure he thought it was a great opportunity - kind of like being asked to preach before the city council or being invited to share your faith with John Key and his cabinet.

Paul’s sermon

Paul had a great introduction to his message that seized their attention immediately. Look at verses 22-23 and you’ll see what I mean. In his opening words he didn’t put them down or attack their idolatry. In fact, he sort of paid them a compliment by saying, “I’ve walked around your fair city and it’s obvious to me that you are a very religious people. I see that you are ‘god-fearers.’”

He went on to comment that in his wandering about town he had discovered an altar made to an ‘unknown God’. This God, whom you worship without knowing, is the one I’m telling you about.

Listen now as I read. Referring to their unknown God; Paul said,

²⁴“He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since he is Lord of heaven and earth, he doesn’t live in man-made temples, ²⁵and human hands can’t serve his needs—for he has no needs. He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need. ²⁶From one man he created all the nations throughout the whole earth. He decided beforehand when they should rise and fall, and he determined their boundaries.

²⁷“His purpose was for the nations to seek after God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him—though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸For in him we live and move and exist. As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’ ²⁹And since this is true, we shouldn’t think of God as an idol designed by craftsmen from gold or silver or stone.

³⁰“God overlooked people’s ignorance about these things in earlier times, but now he commands everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and turn to him. ³¹For he has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man he has appointed, and he proved to everyone who this is by raising him from the dead.”

What a great little sermon – short and sweet.

A good sermon has one main point and this one is “your ‘unknown’ God has made Himself KNOWN” – and he has three subpoints, which is about as much as anyone can remember.

A. First, Paul says **He has made Himself known in CREATION.**

- God is unlike their “gods” because He was not created by man. In fact, he is the Originator of all things, of the stone, wood, and precious metals that the Greeks used to make all of their idols.
- The “unknown” God did not need their sacrifices. No real “god” would. To need anything would make that being less than a god!
- God doesn’t need our gifts - He gives us our needs. Our very life and breath - everything is from God. He is our Sustainer not the other way around.

God loves visual aids! He loves to put things all around us in the created order to teach us things about Himself so when we look at and study creation, we learn about God.

It was fascinating last week to hear Jeff Tallon talk about Science and the Bible: Collision or Collusion. Science and bible are not in conflict with each other, science and God are compatible, we need to be informed about how to read and understand both Science and the bible.

So-yes, this part of Paul's sermon still needs to be heard today because the more we look at Creation, the more we will be able to know about God.

B. Well, at this point in his message Paul went on to say that the "unknown God" **has also made Himself known in the human HEART.**

Verse 27 shows us that God designed each of us with a need to know Him - a hunger to find Him. He built each of us with sort of a "God-shaped hole" in the midst of our being. There is a natural curiosity about things spiritual. There has to be something that explains why every culture on earth has a significant spiritual aspect to it.

Now, I think we at OBC need to hear this fact – It seems that most Christians in NZ are fearful about sharing their faith story. I think that fear comes about because we think we are all on our own when it comes to things spiritual - and I admit, I fall into that thought too! But the fact is, we are never alone - God has gone before us in every witnessing encounter. He's hard-wired every human being to seek Him, so when we share our faith we're just helping them find what they want. We're just joining God in His work. We'll talk more about this in the next few months. But remember, God has made Himself known in the human heart.

This leads us to Paul's final point and it's found in verse 31 where he reminded the council that,

C. **...the unknown God has made Himself known-through His SON, Jesus Christ.**

Yes God has revealed Himself - in the form of His only Son.

We, the church, have messed this up somewhat. There is a well known quote from Mahatma Gandhi "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

We have to sort this out. This why we say 'read the bible regularly', especially the gospels, so that you get to know who Jesus is, hang out with him and he will rub off on you. We, the church, need to work hard to be more like Jesus. It's not easy, and there are some in the wider church family that make it pretty difficult to keep up our reputation, and yes the media doesn't always help, but we have a responsibility, there is a lot riding on it.

Conclusion

Okay, that's Paul's sermon - I wonder if he felt like doing a victory lap at the end, or just slinking out the back door.

- Some mocked his message.
- Others were polite saying they'd like to hear him preach again someday.
- but verse 34 says, 'but some joined him and became believers.'

Well, what is your response to Paul's sermon? I pray you will not mock Paul's sermon, because it is the truth...but don't just be polite, or just believe me, you need to ask the questions, debate the issues just like the Bereans and Athenians did, discover the truth for yourself, that way it will stick through the hard times.

If you're already a believer, you have a responsibility to share the truth, I am not saying by preaching on street corners, like Paul, but listening and understanding your friends and family and just helping them take one step closer to Jesus.