

Rector's Sermon: 17 May 2020

I used to have a real love/hate relationship with St Paul. Paul, let's be honest, can be challenging to deal with; some New Testament writings attributed to him express negative views of women amongst others, and his tone can at worst be pugnacious and argumentative. But if we're serious about our faith, we have to come to terms with Paul. For one thing, even though the gospels appear before Paul's letters in the New Testament, Paul's writings came first. It is indisputable that Paul is our first Christian witness. Without St Paul the Christian Faith would not have spread and I would not be sitting here now speaking to you all!

I love the way the biblical scholar Marcus Borg describes Paul as sometimes appealing, and sometimes appalling. Whether Paul is appealing or appalling can depend on which Paul we meet: Biblical scholars recognise that not all the letters in the New Testament that bear Paul's name were actually written by him. These scholars distinguish between Paul's genuine letters and the so-called pseudonymous letters attributed to Paul. For example, though First and Second Timothy and Titus bear Paul's name, we now don't believe they were actually written by him, and yet they contain most of the sexist things Paul supposedly said. In fact, in Paul's genuine letters, he argues for a radical equality of all believers, male and female, based on our adoption into the body of Christ through baptism. For example, in the letter to the Galatians Paul writes that, in Christ, "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." That is a great example of the appealing Paul.

And you will be relieved to know that it is the appealing Paul that we meet in our reading from Acts today. In this reading, we encounter Paul preaching to the elite of Athens. Notice how sensitively Paul tailors his message to connect with the Athenians in a way that enables them to hear the Good News he is trying to share. We find him preaching to an entirely pagan audience, so he doesn't rely on his usual references to the Law of Moses or the Old Testament prophets – what do these people know about Moses? Instead, Paul quotes a couple of Athenian poet philosophers. He meets them where they are and compliments how religious the Athenians are, with their many idols, noting how this indicates the natural desire within all people to seek after God, hoping to find meaning in the world.

Paul is troubled, however, that all these idols will prevent the Athenians from forming a relationship to the Living God he is telling them about. Our culture is no less littered with idols than Athens was in the first century, and I wonder what Paul would make of 21st century Western Society if he came to preach to us? Maybe our idols are less literal than the idols Paul found in Athens, but they serve the same purpose, for an idol, by its very nature, stands in the place of God, occupying a place of ultimate concern in our hearts and preventing us from connecting with the true and living God. What is the ultimate concern in our lives? Many of us, who are ultimately living comfortable lives, spend our time worried about money, or appearance, or power, and we allow these worries to become idols, taking up all the space in our hearts and not giving God any room to live inside us.

Paul says to the Athenians that they are looking for God in the wrong places. God is not contained in little golden statues, or indeed in anything that springs from the “art and imagination of mortals.” Paul would say the same thing to us. God is not to be found in anxious worries about money and appearance and power. Paul informs the Athenians that the Unknown God they have been searching for is to be found within them. This unknown God is the source and supporter of all, “the one in whom we live and move and have our being.” God is radically present to each and every one of us, and we find God in the communities and relationships we build with others, with each person being a bearer of the image of God.

Most of all, God is revealed to us in the person of Jesus, in the incarnation. Paul’s final testimony to the Athenians about his embodied vision of God is to tell them about Jesus. God has given us “assurance” of God’s embodied presence among us “by raising [Jesus] from the dead.” Not just spiritually – Paul’s claim is that God restored Jesus’ earthly body.

Now this is pure dynamite. Greek philosophy held that the physical body was inferior, impure – all of Greek philosophy pointed in the direction of escaping this dirty physical existence into a world of pure spirit. This philosophy is still the primary philosophy of the 21st Century Western Society. Therefore, for Athenians, it was utterly counter intuitive to imagine a God who entered into human flesh, to live and die as one of us. It’s not surprising that many of the Athenians listening to Paul’s message mocked; they simply couldn’t begin to imagine a God who would succumb to the dirt and sweat and suffering of this life, just so we could know him better.

And yet, this is exactly what Jesus reveals to us - a God willing to walk with us even when the road gets rough. A God yearning to be with us in the simple, ordinary stuff of life, in bread broken and wine poured. A God embodied in community that spills forth into the world in abundance and love.

If we are looking for God today, look in the mirror, look at one another. God’s image is revealed in every face we see here today, whether on our TV screens if we are self-isolating, or on our walks, or when we shop. Sometimes we have to help each other to discover our God given image and identity, but it is there, it is always there because we are loved by God.

Like Paul, we are called to go into the world and share God’s Good News with everyone we encounter – and in language they can understand. Just as Paul adjusted his message so the Athenians could encounter God, we are called to talk about God’s love in today’s vernacular so that everyone can hear it. That is why the church is embracing online worship during this pandemic. We are using today’s virtual vernacular to share the Good News of Christ.

In the Gospel passage today, Jesus tells his disciples that he is sending them another Advocate, the Spirit of truth. Jesus says that this Spirit will abide with us and live inside us. If we open our hearts and invite God’s Spirit in, no idols we make will be able to withstand the truth of God’s love. We think money will make us happy, but the Spirit of truth teaches us that true happiness cannot be

bought. We think that power and control are important, but the Spirit of truth teaches us that kindness, generosity and love are far more important. And it is God's Spirit living in us that inspires us to go into the world and share God's love as widely as possible – even if it seems the world cannot or will not receive this message. The world may not know God's Spirit of truth and love yet. But it will, if we allow God's truth and love to live in us, and speak through us. Amen.

Tim