

ACTS 17.16-34: GOOD NEWS FOR GOD-ADDICTS

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1. WE ARE BY NATURE GOD-ADDICTS

Karl Stern, a Jewish psychiatrist who became a Christian, once wrote: "*Man has been created a God-addict*". I believe that to be true.

The psalmist was not just speaking of himself, but of humankind in general when he declared: "**As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God**" (Psalm 42.1-2).

Even those who apparently deny the existence of God admit that there is within them a thirst for God.

Jean Paul Sartre, the famous 20th century French philosopher: "*That God does not exist, I cannot deny. That my whole being cries out for God, I cannot forget*".

Whatever we may think with our minds, our hearts testify that we are made for God.

In the words of Augustine: "*The heart is restless, until it finds its rest in you, O God*"

That certainly was true in Athens:

1C Athens

Luke tells us that when Paul came to Athens, "**he was greatly upset when he noticed how full of idols the city was**" (Acts 17.16).

Luke uses a very unusually word (*kateidolos*) which suggests that the city was "overwhelmed" with gods - "smothered with them" - "swamped by them". Later Paul himself says: "**I see that in every way you Athenians are very religious**" (v22)

This was no mere Christian exaggeration. Athens was famous for its 'religiosity'.

- The Greek historian Xenophon described Athens as "*one great altar, one great sacrifice*"
- The Athenians were reckoned to be the "*most religious*" of all human beings (so Sophocles & Josephus)
- One Roman satirist declared that it was easier to find a god there than a man.
- John Stott: "*There were innumerable temples, shrines, statues and altars..... The whole Greek pantheon was there, all the gods of Olympus. And they were beautiful. They were not only made of stone and brass, but of gold, silver, ivory and marble.*" It must have been an overwhelming sight.

Yet Luke doesn't say that Paul was overwhelmed by their beauty - rather he was "**greatly upset**". He was pained to see how sophisticated Athens had been conned by these false gods. For all their religiosity, they were a lost society.

20C Britain

But 1C Athens was not the only society to have lost its way.

There are many parallels between 21C Britain and 1C Athens.

For all our sophistication, we too are a lost generation.

As a nation we have by & large thrown over the trappings of the Christian faith - yet we are still searching for God.

The fact is that a thorough going atheistic secularism does not satisfy - the heart cries out for God. People are increasingly disillusioned with the desert of western materialism.

The American **Theodore Roszak** expounded the emptiness of modern life in his book *Where The Wasteland Ends*. He wrote: We are suffering from "*a psychic claustrophobia within the scientific world view*" in which the human spirit cannot breathe. Though not a Christian, Roszak went on: Without transcendence "*the person shrivels*". Reality cannot be confined in a test tube, nor be smeared on a slide for microscopic examination. Life has another dimension - Reality is "*awesomely vast*".

Roszak is not alone in his dissatisfaction with life.

People may have given up on the church, but they have not given up on God altogether. The church may be in retreat, but not belief in the supernatural.

Sociologists speak not only of a process of secularisation, but also a process of "*saclarisation*". The sacred is pursued by many of our peers in a variety of weird & wonderful ways. You only have to go into WH Smith's or Waterstone's and look at their religion section, and you will see all kinds of weird and wonderful titles propounding beliefs in such things as pantheism, spiritism, reincarnation, and evolutionary optimism.

A few years ago a leading article in *The Economist* stated that "*a groping has begun for new forms of spiritual experience*" - it went on to warn that "*in that search for God, it is all too easy to blunder into the arms of Satan instead*".

Certainly there has been a tremendous upsurge of interest in the occult.

In France 40,000 astrologers, healers, mediums and the like are registered for income-tax purposes, compared with 26,000 RC priests and 6000 psychiatrists. A recent poll in that country revealed that more people believe in the devil today than a decade ago.

Religion is by no means dead. If ever once we lived in a secular world, we no longer do so. We live in "*a post-secular world*" in which men and women - like the Athenians of old - are looking for God (see Acts 17.27).

2. GOD IS KNOWABLE IN JESUS

The Good News is that there is hope for God-addicts.

Our search for God is over. God has come to us in Jesus.

Look at the way in which Paul opened his address to the Areopagus, which when Paul visited Athens was a cross between a London club & a university SCR: "**I see that in every way you Athenians are very religious. For as I walked through your city and looked at the places where you worship, I found an altar on which it is written, 'To an unknown God'. That which you worship, then, even though you do not know it, is what I now proclaim to you**" (17.22b-23).

How the Athenians came to have an altar "**To an unknown God**" we do not know

- It may be that a derelict altar had been repaired, & since the original dedication could not be ascertained, then the inscription "**to an unknown god**" would have been quite appropriate (FFB).
- Alternatively they may have erected the altar in order to placate any deity in whose honour they had not thought to erect a temple/place of worship.

But whatever the reason, this provided a marvellous sermon starter for Paul.

Your unknown god, said Paul, is the **Lord of heaven & earth** (v24).

- He is the Creator of the universe: "**He made the world & everything in it**" (v24)
- He is the Sustainer of life: "**He himself gives life & breath & everything else to everyone**" (v25)
- He is the Ruler of all nations: "**He himself fixed beforehand the exact times and the limits of the places where they would live**" (v26)

You can imagine Paul hammering his points home

The living God is so much bigger than your tin-pot gods.

He transcends all human limitations of space & time - indeed, he transcends all human thought forms & categories.

In no way can he be confined to some shrine or temple made by human hands (v24).

What's more, as the living God he doesn't need us to maintain his existence by bring to him offerings of food and drink (v25) - rather we need him for our existence.

This living God is knowable - "**God is actually not far from each one of us**" (v27).

Your poets, Epimenides & Aratus, were right: "**in him we live and move and exist**". "**we too are his children**" (v28). Hence the God-addiction!

It is at this point that the Areopagus speech proves tantalising thin.

Sadly we have no full transcript .

Indeed, all 9 verses would only take 2 minutes to read, & that slowly.

However, it is clear from Luke's account of Paul's stay in Athens that Paul majored on Jesus. According to v18 Paul spent his time in Athens "**preaching about Jesus and the resurrection**".

I.e. Paul preached on the God who has made himself known in Jesus.

We don't know precisely what Paul will have said about Jesus.

But if he preached the **Resurrection**, then he will have preached the **Cross** too.

Indeed, with an audience which included **Stoic and Epicurean philosophers** (v18) he will have almost certainly said two things in particular about the cross & resurrection:

i) The Cross of Jesus is a sign of God's love

To the Stoic philosophers Paul's message would have been: "**God loves you - look at Jesus - look at his cross**".

The message of God's love in Jesus would have struck them as sensational.

For one of the central Stoic tenets was that God has no feelings ("**apathetic**").

They argued that if a person has feelings, this means that someone else can make him glad/sad, happy/unhappy: i.e. the other person can exercise influence upon another - and if one can exercise influence , then clearly for that moment they must be greater than the other. Now nobody can be greater than God. Therefore God has no feelings.

BUT God does have feelings; **"God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us"** (NRSV Rom 5.8).

Here was good news for the Stoics of Paul's day - what's more, good news for us today. The God who made the heavens and the earth loves you & me - he loves you and me so much that he gave his Son.

ii) The Resurrection of Jesus is a sign of God's offer of life

The Epicureans believed that pleasure was the sole end of life.

Alas, all our pleasures are short-lived.

Indeed, it was said that the greatest enemy of happiness is death.

To the Epicurean philosophers Paul will have proclaimed the abundant life we may have in Jesus - life which begins in the here and now - life which goes on beyond death.

This new life was clearly a major plank in Paul's preaching - so much so that some thought he was preaching about two gods - Jesus & and his girl-friend *Anastasis*! Actually *Anastasis* was not a person – but rather the Greek word for resurrection.

Here too is good news for men & women of today. Death need not have the last word!

3. GOD DEMANDS A RESPONSE

Paul will have majored on the Cross & Resurrection of Jesus - on the offer of God's forgiveness & new life in Jesus. But it's clear too that he went on to speak of the response we need to make to God.

"God has overlooked the times when people did not know him, but now he commands all of them everywhere to turn away from their evil ways. For he has fixed a day on which he will judge the whole world with justice by means of a man he has chosen. He has given proof of this by raising that man from death" (vv30,31)

Paul had begun his address by speaking of the Athenians' ignorance of God.

He ends by saying that their ignorance is no longer excusable.

"Now he commands all people everywhere to repent" [NRSV] - **"to turn away from their evil ways"** [GNB]. The fact is that we continue as we are at our peril.

This is God's world - it is a moral world where God's standards count.

Therefore **"repent & believe the Gospel"**

Paul makes three points in particular about the judgement to come:

i) God will judge the world

Nobody will be able to escape - the living & the dead, the simple & the sophisticated - all will have to stand before the judgement seat

ii) God will judge the world with righteousness

There will be no possibility of a miscarriage of justice - we may be able to fool others, but we will not be able to fool God.

iii) God has already fixed the day when he will judge the world

The time may be unknown to us - but that makes it no less certain. Indeed, said Paul, if you want proof of who will be his agent of judgement to come, then you have no further to look than the resurrection of Jesus.

Therefore "**repent**" / "**turn away from your evil ways**".

God demands a response.

Sadly, as far as the Athenians were concerned, their response was mixed:

- "**Some made fun about him**" (v32a) - they "**scoffed**" [NRSV] - Jerusalem Bible: "**burst out laughing**". For them all this talk about resurrection & repentance seemed laughable. Yes, there are many who today who like to think that the Xian Gospel is one big hoax. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, it certainly is the cruellest of jokes. But supposing he did?
- "**Others said: 'We want to hear you speak about this again'**" (v32b). They were a little more polite - but they were actually playing with fire by deferring a decision about Jesus. NB story of three apprentice devils, who were telling Satan what they proposed to do: The 1st said, "*I will tell people there is no God*". But Satan replied: "*That will not do, because in their heart of hearts they know there is a God*". The 2nd said: "*I will tell people there is no hell*". Satan said: "*That will not do, because people have their regrets & their remorse and they have already tasted their own punishment*". The 3rd said: "*I will tell them **there is no hurry***". "*Go*", said Satan, "*and you will ruin people by the millions*". Tomorrow is the most dangerous word in the English language - or it may well be that tomorrow will never come
- "**Some believed**" (v34). Among them were Dionysius and Damaris, two members of the Areopagus. They believed in "**Jesus and the resurrection**" (v18).

We too are called to make a response. Which will yours be?

The good news is that in Jesus our search for God is at an end.

God has done the unthinkable and come to us in Jesus.

In Jesus - and in Jesus alone - our addiction for God can be satisfied.

In Jesus - and in Jesus alone - the human heart can find rest.

As the Psalmist said, "**find out for yourself how good the Lord is**" [GNB]; come "**taste and see that the Lord is good**" [NRSV] (Ps 34.6).