

6th Sunday of Easter (A)

Making connections

Acts 17:22-31, 1 Peter 3:13-22, Psalm 66:8-20

Over the decades we've seen the church move from being close to the centre of our society to where it is now – on the edge. In the last census (2018) 48% of the population identified themselves as 'no religion' and Anglicans comprised just 6.7%. There's no point bemoaning this change. Rather, let's see it as a gift – an opportunity to discover new ways of being church – fresh ways of sharing the gospel and living out the good news – or as the writer of today's epistle puts it – to be ready to give an account of the hope that's in us and to do it with gentleness and reverence. And as we do so, remember that the early church, out of which our Scripture readings come, had no buildings, and no political influence. They were very much on the edge. Yet, they turned the world upside-down.

The passage from Acts gives us some clues about how we might go about this. Paul is visiting Athens, the philosophical capital of the ancient world. He's been doing his usual thing, going to the synagogue and arguing with his fellow Jews, and he's been visiting the marketplace and talking to people there. What he's been saying, about Jesus and the resurrection, has intrigued this bunch of sophisticated Athenians, so they get Paul along to the Areopagus – that's the place where all the philosophers hang out – and they ask him to tell them more.

In some ways Athenian culture isn't dissimilar to ours. Like most people today, the Athenians weren't familiar with the Bible, but they were interested in spiritual matters. They had the reputation of being curious about such things and Athens was a veritable forest of altars, shrines, and temples. While less than half of New Zealanders profess any level of religious adherence, that doesn't mean that we aren't a spiritual people. You've heard it said, 'I'm not religious, but I'm spiritual.' For sure, spirituality can mean anything, and people put together their own spiritual packages, which shows that people are searching for something more – for meaning and purpose. We can easily assume that those around us aren't interested in God, and so we say nothing because of that – when in fact they are often very curious. But they don't want to be judged, or spoken to in some religious language, which is totally foreign to them. This is how it was in Athens, and Paul makes the most of their curiosity.

Paul doesn't damn all these different religious expressions he sees around the place, nor does he use a whole lot of religious jargon. This would alienate his listeners. Instead, he looks for a point of connection and begins by speaking of the Athenians' devotion. His technique is simple. He builds rapport with his audience:

“Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”

He goes on to make connections between Greek culture and the Jewish-Christian story. He's not being judgemental. He doesn't assume that just because the people he's talking with don't worship as he does, that they have no interest in spiritual things. He connects with people where they are. His technique is to build bridges – a bridge between an unknown god and the known God.

To share the good news, we can't keep our faith in a religious box called 'church,' otherwise we end up talking to ourselves. We need to be open to new ways of connecting with people in our common search for God. I learned this lesson some years ago at my gym. My trainer, who was a champion powerlifter, wanted to find out more about Christianity. He had visited several churches and would ask questions about why they believed certain things. He was frustrated because they wouldn't

explain the 'whys.' They would just say, 'That's how it is.' So, he asked me because I was always asking him questions about his sport. So, here I was, in the gym, having these chats about God – usually between press-ups and dead-lifts. As these conversations continued, we learned from each other – we made links between the sport of powerlifting and the Christian faith. That's how Paul operated in Athens. It's about making connections, noticing what's important to the people we meet. What Paul did, and what my trainer in the gym taught me, was to look for a common language.

People ask questions about faith and spirituality, but they don't want their questions condemned or their searching judged. Rather, we share together a common search for God. This is what Paul affirms. He encourages them in their spiritual searching. He builds on that inscription he saw on an altar – 'To an unknown god.' Paul says to the Athenians, that God created us to search for God, and finally, to find God. After years of searching, Augustine of Hippo said something similar, 'O God you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you.'

We don't need all the answers – simply be willing to journey with others as they search – and that searching can go on for a long time before a person finally connects with God. Our task is to enable people in that journey. Not infrequently I have conversations with random people. One day I was walking around a cemetery and met a couple visiting a grave. We got talking. They shared with me questions and tears. The talk went on for some time and it ended with the three of us having a hug, and more tears being shared. That night, as I thought about this random meeting, I wondered if, perhaps I'd been able to make the love of God a little more real – that maybe, I'd been able to help them connect with God who is love.

We have to realise for ourselves, and help others to see, what Paul told the Athenians, that God doesn't live in shrines made by human hands – not in buildings (however beautiful they may be), nor any other object – like all the 'stuff' that can fill our lives. God lives in people. Paul was introducing to the Athenians the radical idea that God is about relationship. We are, as he put it (quoting their own poets), 'God's offspring.' God isn't far from each one of us. The life we're offered, the life we're to share, is one of relating to each other and to God – God 'in whom we live and move and have our being.'

I think of faithful Jesus followers (people who would describe themselves as ordinary Christians) – who don't give neat answers to tough questions, who don't quote lots of biblical verses – but who take care of their neighbours, who give to the life of their community, who offer their time and talents, their creativity and resources to support others. I see these people making the unknown god known – making real, the life of Jesus... I wonder, what connections might we make – how can we share in fresh ways the gospel with gentleness and reverence.

Paul's ends his speech to the Athenians on a risky note. He mentions the resurrection of Jesus. It's risky, because it risks rejection by his audience. Yet the resurrection is what differentiates the God Paul is proclaiming from everything else. For some people a Jesus who is alive today will be taking things too far, and they'll walk away. That's what Paul found. The bit that comes just after today's reading from Acts tells how some scoffed at this talk of resurrection – but others asked to hear more. And some of those Paul was speaking with became believers. I guess Paul's other lesson to us, is not to take rejection personally – not to get despondent or annoyed. After all, he's showing us how to give an account of the hope that's in us, with gentleness and reverence. It's the invitation for us to say to others, as the psalmist says, 'Come then and listen... and I will tell you what God has done for me.'

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Hastings – 14.5.2023*