

Sermon Given by

Tony Heywood

At the Evening Service on 5<sup>th</sup> December 2010

### Acts 17:16-34 - "What about other religions?"

Militant atheists like Richard Dawkins get a lot of coverage on TV and radio these days. The national secular society seems to be more and more prominent as well. It's an indication of how increasingly we're living in a post-Christian society.

And yet whilst organised religion is undoubtedly on the wane, we'd be wrong to conclude that all spirituality is declining. A recent poll showed that over 50% of Brits describe themselves as quote, "spiritual." In fact only 12% of Brits describe themselves as a "non-spiritual" person.

That's the shift we're seeing; not to an out and out atheism but to a general, waffly, vague, very personalised spirituality. Modern spirituality says it's up to you what god you believe in and whether you call him, her or it 'god' or a 'life force'.

This is a DIY religion or rather PYO – a pick your own religion. As in the market place so in the spiritual realm the consumer is king. It's up to us to choose what we believe and unsurprisingly it's not only very subjective; it's very confused.

So listen to Kate Winslett - she said this: "I'm not an early to bed person though I'm full of good intentions; it's usually around 12:45. I light a candle and have a bit of a chat with God or something, though I'm not a religious person." She speaks very much as a spokesman of her generation – "a bit of a chat with God or something."

A few years back Madonna was spotted gathering her dancers around her to pray with them before going on stage. When asked to whom she'd been praying she said, "Everyone in the room and my idea of God."

The interviewer asked her to describe her god. To which she replied, "It's like calling on a power I have inside myself. It's a protector, an adviser, it's soothing and comforting...and non-judgemental"

"But is it a supreme being asked the interviewer?" Madonna replied that she didn't know and that she could change her mind about it in half an hour.

Or for more confusion and this is probably my favourite, listen to David Beckham: "I have a great sense of spirituality" he says. "I want to get Brooklyn christened but I don't know into what religion yet."

There's a lot of spirituality about today; people sense there's a God, a life-force but they don't have the faintest idea what he, she or it is. And in this our society is very similar to 1<sup>st</sup> Century Athens.

In Athens no one god dominated there were 100s to choose from and they were everywhere just like they are today the only difference being that today they are mental images whereas in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Athens they were metal images.

According to one ancient writer called Pausanias who was a sort of Bill Bryson of the ancient world and who produced his own Rough Guide to the Mediterranean, Athens had 30,000 statues of gods and goddesses in its midst. An extraordinary fact given that there were only 10,000 people living in the city. It's no wonder v16 that "while Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols." That brings us to our first heading **Paul's passion for God's glory**. That's the first thing we learn from Paul.

So here is Paul in Athens on his own after two missions that had gone well but had ended in persecution. Paul had to be quickly whisked away from his friends to avoid any further trouble. And by the time Paul comes to Athens, it is a city that is past its prime. Rome is now the new dominant force, but that does not stop Athens still being the centre for all things cultural in the ancient world.

It was the home of democracy, philosophy, architecture, theatre, and many other intellectual pursuits besides. It was a modern day Venice, Paris and Cambridge all rolled into one, but slightly fraying at the edges.

And if you were an ancient tourist wandering round the city, then you probably couldn't fail to be impressed with what you saw. The Parthenon dominates the city today and in Paul's day would have been even more impressive. Inside was a huge statue of Athene the patron goddess of Athens, covered in gold and ivory. The Temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

Paul was a man of culture too, very learned and we might imagine him longing to go to a place like Athens and immerse himself in the high culture. Enjoy a bit of time off from the rigours of being a pioneer missionary and do some sight-seeing before his friends could join up with him.

And yet when he arrives he's not wowed by the stunning architecture; rather he's greatly distressed by what he sees. The open top bus tour of Athens enrages him. Why? Because everywhere he looks he's faced by idols and he hates it when he sees people trusting in stupid statues rather than the living God. He hates to see God's glory and honour going to blocks of wood and metal.

If we had even a fraction of Paul's understanding of the glory and holiness of God, then we too would be deeply offended by idolatry, both in our own lives and when we see it around us. It should cause us distress and anger and grief that people are so lost as they bow down to the modern idols of materialism, pleasure, money, career, sport, the family - frittering their lives away on the things of this world, living their lives for their own name sake, their own glory's sake rather than that of the Living God.

Here is a godly jealousy – Paul was passionate for God's glory and what does it lead to – how does it express itself apart from that feeling of deep distress? Well let's read on v17: "So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the market-place day by day with those who happened to be there."

In other words he got out and started preaching the gospel – to the Jews and God-fearers in the synagogue and to the pagans in the market place.

And that going out to the market place is a good challenge for us. Most non-believers in this country have abandoned our Christian culture – they might still come to a carol service so do make the most of the opportunity they give but by and large we can't expect non-believers to come to church. We

must go to them; befriending them, getting alongside them, caring for them, sharing our lives and over time the gospel with them.

It's good to be having our carol service in the pub next Sunday – that is the LS equivalent to the market place in Athens – it's where people hang out and socialise. And increasingly we'll need to be imaginative and bold in taking the gospel message to the market place. That's the challenge for us – to take the gospel and go to them. John Stott puts it brilliantly when he writes: "We don't do what Paul did because we don't feel what Paul felt and we don't feel what Paul felt because we don't see what Paul saw." This takes us back to v16. If we had divine spectacles on wouldn't we see a village, a society full of idols and if we did and if we had a divinely touched heart would we not be deeply distressed and provoked – if we saw that so many had no true knowledge of the one true God we'd do something like Paul did.

So we've seen Paul's passion for God's glory – a great challenge to us. Secondly, we see **Paul's understanding of God's character**

And these first two points are very much linked because it's only as we grow in our understanding of God's character that we'll grow more passionate for God's glory.

So v18 Paul debates with these philosophers – they're confused, there's a bit of sledging but they are intrigued and they want to find out more so v19 they invite him to a meeting of the Areopagus, which was a mix between the union debating chambers and the House of Lords – a meeting place for intellectuals to discuss ideas.

So here's Paul in this daunting environment – a very learned and sophisticated audience tuning in to what he has to say.

V22 "Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: 'Men of Athens! I see that you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now, what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.'"

These philosophers have been acting as if the search for God and wisdom was an endless quest: that God was hiding but they were searching; wisdom was elusive but they had gathered the brightest brains and best ideas, and would close their minds to no possibilities until they found the mind of God. They were the equivalents, I suppose, of the modern agnostic or at least the pluralist, who says 'Who knows what the truth is, or even if there is such a thing as truth, but at least we can listen to one another.'

And it sounds very humble, doesn't it? But here's the test of whether it really is humble: how will they respond to the truth of the gospel? You see, the quest is over. V23b: "what you worship as unknown I am going to proclaim to you."

You may have heard something like this before, but I don't think many of you have met my sister, Anna. Imagine that some of you were speculating about her, and some said she was tall and others short, some that she was kind but others rather nasty, and so on until one of you pipes up, 'Look, this is ridiculous. None of us have met her. We can't know.' That's the humility of agnosticism, of an

open mind, of worship at the shrine of an 'unknown God'. But what if my sister surprises us, she flies over from her home in Australia and walks in to this building tonight?

At that point, if someone insisted on continuing to speculate what she was like, that would be very rude. It would be to ignore her.

In Jesus, the real God has walked into our world. He is knowable, and he's proven it by the resurrection, and the humble thing now is to listen to him and respond to him. The first challenge that the gospel presents us with is this: do we really want to worship God? Or is our current way of thinking, our open-mindedness and not wanting to be pinned down, actually more important to us than he is?

Paul confronts their ignorance and he tells them that we're dependent on God not he on us. V24: "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else."

The people Paul is speaking to have shrunk God down small enough to fit into a temple, passive enough to be kept where they want him, weak enough that they need to service him and quiet enough that they get to speak on his behalf; they have made God into exactly what they want him to be. But the true God, the God of the Scriptures is not such a God.

He is the mighty Creator and Sustainer of everything! He doesn't need a temple or a cathedral or a beautiful medieval building to live in! There's no such thing as sacred space he tells them. This church building is no more holy a space than the bus shelter on the High St or the Memorial Hall or any one of our homes.

And notice that by saying this Paul is not just declaring the truth but exposing error and if we're going to proclaim the truth to our culture we must do some demolition work as well.

What is so devastating for the Athenians is that they know this already. In v28 he quotes from their own thinkers: the poet Epimenides and the 3rd century Stoic Aratus. They knew that God was bigger than they were making him, so to invent their own religion was stupid. To worship an idol was stupid. It was wilfully to misrepresent the person of God. And it's worth thinking about how we wilfully misrepresent God in a similar way.

All of us have done it, perhaps some of us still are. We've said 'I like to think of God as this' or 'I prefer to believe in a God like that'. We know perfectly well that just wanting God to be a certain way doesn't make him that way. The gospel confronts us with a challenge: will we seek to relate to this personal God, or will we hide behind a religion of our own making?

So we learn from Paul a passion for God's glory, a right understanding of God's character. Next we see that **he doesn't duck the fact of the coming judgement**

V30 "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."

It's a great shame when Christian leaders and preachers apologise for judgement or leave it out altogether. It is good news that there's going to be a judgement – it means that we live in a moral universe. So those who exploited black labour are going to be judged. Those who terrorised white farmers are going to be judged. Those who've been indifferent to the beggar at their gate will be judged. Those who've bombed innocent citizens will be judged. Those who've lived their life ignoring God will be judged. This is good news - it would be intolerable to live in an amoral universe where God couldn't care less about right or wrong. Judgement is coming – this is a good thing and it should motivate us to lovingly but urgently call people to repent.

As we finish let's note the 3 consequences of proclaiming the gospel message. 1<sup>st</sup> we can expect some to sneer. v32 “When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered...”

We can imagine what they said: that this message of Paul's was terribly simple, a bit narrow, it was anti-intellectual and ‘that's the trouble with these fundamentalists’. And by calling Paul a fundamentalist they never had to engage with anything he said. If we share the Christian message faithfully, which means not just telling people about Jesus but also telling them about themselves, that they're wrong, then we can expect our fair share of sneers. That's never much fun but don't let it put you off.

The second response v32: “...but others said, “we want to hear you again on this subject.” And maybe there are some here tonight and you're interested but you have lots of questions; you want to investigate further. Well that's great; keep coming to church, read the Bible for yourself and another brilliant to investigate further would be by doing the Christianity Explored course. We'll re running one in the new year – do let us know if you'd be interested in that.

And then, wonderfully, there's the third response, v34: “A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.” They saw that what Paul said about themselves and about God was true and so they repented and believed. And there may be someone here tonight – you know all this true and you know you want and you need to do something about it.

Michael Alison was a very distinguished MP for many years before he stood down at the 1997 election. Years earlier – I think it was in 1950 he had finished his National Service and then gone off to university. He was taken along to the Christian Union – the preacher was speaking on Acts 17:30-31 and he focussed on those words at the end of v30: “but now he (God) commands all people everywhere to repent.”

And what Michael Alison said looking back on that time was that if the sermon had been about faith or believing he'd have found it very difficult to understand but as he had just come out of the army he knew all about commands from those in authority over him and so when he heard that God commands all people everywhere to repent – he did just that and he repented there and then. It was the start of a wonderful journey with God that kept him going as we heard earlier that Joan's faith has kept her going.

So if you're not a follower of Jesus, God in this passage is not primarily inviting you, or wooing you, or persuading you. In other passages of Scripture he does those things but not here. Here tonight God is ordering you to repent and turn to him.

You might find blunt talk like that offensive but it is actually the loving caring blunt talk of the sailor who thrusts a life-jacket at you as the ship is sinking and orders you, commands you to jump into the lifeboat.

It's the loving caring blunt talk of the doctor who commands the dying patient to take the only medicine that will save him.

If you've heard this command of God to repent and you want to take action please come and see afterwards; I'd love to explain how you can take that step.

---

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)