

On a visit to Athens

Acts 17:22–31

Psalm 66:8–20

1 Peter 3:13–22

John 14:15–21

Text: Acts 17:22, 30-31

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.

While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.’

Introduction

If the Apostle Paul made a visit to Markham this year I wonder if he would make a similar observation as he did when he visited first century Athens? “I see how extremely religious you are in every way.” According to a 2019 BBC article, [Tomorrow's Gods: What is the future of religion?](#), the rise of secularism, the growing number of people who say they have no religion at all, along with confidence in science providing tools to understand and shape the world has given way to “a growing consensus that the future of religion is that it has no future.” The Apostle Paul may shape his observation differently; he may say, “I see how extremely spiritual you are in every way.” Everyone lives their lives according to some ideology about the nature of life, even if it is the world according to ‘me.’

In a [2019 interview](#) on National Public Radio (NPR) Elton John explains why he prefers a “higher power” over God. John was speaking of his experience in rehab when it came to the point of the God talk and it felt like it just wasn’t for him. John said, “Well, the God thing, I was angry [because] God, for me, represented a punishment. ... And I really resented the word God. And then someone said to me, ‘Listen - do you believe in something greater than yourself?’ And I said, ‘Of course I do. ... Of course, I only have to look up in the sky to believe in something greater than myself, or I’ll go walk in the field or look at a mountain. And they said, well, then that’s it. Use it. That’s how - say higher power instead of God. And I went, I can do that. I can do that.”

Neuroscientist, philosopher, and famous atheist Sam Harris in a conversation on National Public Radio about artificial intelligence said, “It is generally agreed upon by scientists that within 50 years the technology will have advanced to the point of being a superhuman intelligence. Harris believes it will then be “the engine of its own improvements.” Harris went on to say, ... As we improve and develop the technology “we have to admit that we’re in the process of building some sort of God. Now would be a good time to make sure it’s a God we can live with.”

I am of a mind that the Apostle Paul’s observation about first century Athenians is not that far removed from 21st century Canadians. The question may not be, ‘do you have a religion,’ rather

the question to be asked is more like, ‘what are you religious about?’ People might describe today’s religious quest as a searching for meaning or significance for our life. Paul might say, I see that you are looking for something to ground your life on, something to provide stability.

1. Some have questioned the wisdom of Paul’s address to the Athenians because not many found it all that compelling (i.e. few converts). The Apostle Paul has said in his Corinthian letter, “I have become all things to all people, so that I might by any means save some.” If you follow the sermons of Paul through the Book of Acts you can see that he shapes what he says with the hearers in mind. According to the scholar C.K. Barrett, Paul is citing something Socrates said when he began his message saying, “I see how extremely religious you are in every way.” A good place to begin when addressing a first century Athenian audience. In like strategy the Apostle Peter counselled believers, “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.”

What distressed the Apostle Paul when he got to Athens was his observation that the city was full of idols, even one with the inscription “to an unknown god”. So, Paul tells the Athenians that he wants to say something about this unknown god. Paul then tells them of the God who made the world and everything in it, citing poets they know as hinting in this direction; he follows a carefully reasoned argument and draws his conclusion, “Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals.” Paul points them away from these idols by first pointing to the general emptiness of such idols. He is building to his point to look away from these idols to the man God appointed to judge the world.

Now statues to idols may not fill our city but idols persist in many forms.

Theology professor Angela Franks published a recent article on the work of the twentieth century French philosopher Gilles Deleuze titled, [Deleuze on Desire](#). Franks notes that “Deleuze is ... right to see desire as essential to human reality, though he misjudges desire’s purpose.” I found Franks’ article insightful on modern idolatry. Here is some of what she said: “When the old gods were demythologized, and old-fashioned superstition fell away, technological superstition took its place ... We still have infinite, fallen desires that we must manage, and upon which we must impose form. In the technological age, lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (1 John 2:16) do not disappear just because we no longer make offerings to graven idols.

Our technologies are just the latest iteration of our fallen attempt to manage desire. ... We will idolize technology so long as we expect it to do divine things for us, such as satisfy our infinite desires. This is why we are so fickle in our adoration, why we discard last year’s coveted model for the next. ... When another idol seems to provide the end more readily, the worshiper moves on. And there is no end to moving on. So we are weary. Restlessness is baked into idolatry, because finite “gods of one’s own” cannot satisfy the infinite desires implanted in us... each of us is always on the plane, mid-flight in our desire. We want to get off somehow, to arrive at our destination, a definitive idol.”

I like how Franks describes our culture today—‘always on the plane, mid-flight in our desire hoping to arrive at a destination.’ Perhaps what Franks says about our culture is a parallel to what the Apostle Paul observed of Athenian culture; “Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.” (Acts 17:21) The Apostle Paul and Angela Franks make a similar claim, “You will never find satisfaction for our heart’s desire in these idols. Does not the Psalms instruct us that the true fulfilment of human desire is in relationship with God, when the Psalmist says, “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)

Now whatever we think of this sort of proclamation of the gospel, the Apostle Paul is always moving towards his point, proclaiming Jesus Christ, as he says here, “because God has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” The response to Paul’s message in Athens was mixed; some said he was a babler, some scoffed, others thought he spoke of foreign deities, others said ‘we will hear you again.,’ and a few joined Paul and became believers. “This was,” Luke tells us, “because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.” (Luke 17:18) Is response to gospel proclamation all that different today?

2. Do you know what smelling salts are? Smelling salts are a combination of ammonium carbonate and perfume used to restore or stimulate your senses; chemical compounds often used to arouse consciousness. You sometimes see athletes use them because they cause a quick burst of adrenaline. Pastor and author Timothy Keller said, “Properly understood, Christianity is by no means the opiate of the people. It’s more like the smelling salts.”

When Paul said, “God has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed,” does that word of judgement snap your senses awake? Perhaps it causes a bit of an adrenalin rush and arouses consciousness? The idea of God’s judgement is rejected by many; Elton John said as much. But I wonder sometimes if the announcement of God’s judgement is rejected because it puts us in mind of the preacher wagging his or her finger at sinners thundering on about the failings of some. The gospel says we are all sinners fallen short of the glory of God, each turned to our own way; God points at all of us and we are judged wanting.

I raise the point here of a common desire we humans have for justice—things we consider wrong to be set right. If there is no final judgement of right and wrong, then the categories of right and wrong collapse into the whims of personal preference. But we don’t want to say that because we sense that the harm done by something like the sexual exploitation of children really is wrong. But where does this idea of wrong arise from? If things really are never finally set right, then we really do live in a capricious world where the ones strong enough to force their preference on another rules. And we don’t want to believe that; we want things set right. And usually what we want is that other guy, that really bad actor, set right. Personally, we feel confident that we are managing right and wrong quite well within ourselves. On one hand, we don’t want this final judgement because we feel we have a handle on it all and don’t want someone else to tell us

otherwise. On the other hand, we do want the final arbitration because we need those exceptionally bad people finally dealt with!

The Apostle Paul hints at it in his address to the Athenians; hints that the announcement of God's judgement of humanity comes in the announcement of an amnesty provided by God. Paul hints at it when he said that God is at work in the world "so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us." God has not abandoned us in his judgement of us. Rather God's just judgement of the sin of humanity has been borne by another; Jesus Christ who knew no sin became sin for us that in him we might become the righteousness of God. Paul's sermon in Athens is moving to the declaration of the man God appointed, Jesus Christ. For the believer, the judgement of God is always presented as part of the good news of the way made for us in Jesus. And because our Lord took this judgement upon himself there is only life, real life, through believing in him.

And this is what Paul wants every Athenian he addressed that day to experience. He wants them to come to know the man whom God appointed for this final judgement; the man Paul met on the road to Damascus, Jesus Christ. Paul said that for the believer 'your life is hid in Christ.' When God sees you, God sees the Son Jesus with whom he is ever pleased.

3. Like the Apostle Paul, so too the Apostle John; they want hearers to come to know Jesus and find in him an abundance of life that begins now and continue for eternity. They want us to know that Jesus is all that he claims to be. "I am the life," Jesus said and these Apostles were willing to risk life and limb to tell people so, because they found Jesus to have given them life as nothing or no one else could. Paul in his letter to the Romans reminds them that "we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."

In our gospel reading today we read of our Lord's teaching on the night before he gave up his life for us. John has, no doubt, preached this in his sermons many times. We are now in the season of Easter—the time between Jesus' resurrection and ascension. Some may wonder why we read of events of Jesus with his disciples before the crucifixion rather than post-resurrection appearances as we have the last few weeks. Because John wants his hearers to listen to what Jesus said back then and hear it now in the light of the resurrection. When Jesus said 'I will not leave you orphaned,' he was not limiting his promise to just those at the last supper—though it was surely for them. John wants hearers to know that Jesus' promise, heard in the light of the resurrection, is for us all now.

Listen again to our Lord's word that night. "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live." It is true that when he promised them, 'but you will see me,' the disciples did see the risen Jesus. Yet Jesus goes on to say, "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

I know there are many precious and inspiring scripture passages, but surely among them is this wonderful promise of the Saviour, now risen from the dead, 'because I live, you also will live.' And the Apostle John wants his hearers to hear this word just as he did, Jesus looking into the eyes of all—'because I live, you also will live.'