

Acts 17

Let us pray,

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you Lord our strength and our redeemer.

Amen,

Before I start today, I'd like to take the opportunity, on behalf of Vicki, Euan, Iona and myself to thank you for very warm welcome we have received since we've been worshipping here at St Peters. This is our last Sunday here – on Tuesday we begin the move to Bushey, near Watford where I'll be serving my curacy after my ordination later in June. From a soon-to-be curate to a church soon-to-receive a curate I don't think I can really express how much I have appreciated the support and encouragement you have all given me at this stage in my ministry.

We will take with us fond memories of our short time here at St Peter's and will hold you all in our prayers as you all – every single one of you, not just Mark, Ian, Peter, the PCC and the rest of the ministry team, but each of you, all have a part to play in continuing your mission and ministry here in Henleaze, and I would appreciate it if you would do the same for us as we move on to a new chapter. And it's this I'd like to speak to you about today - mission and ministry – for it's that which we're all called to do, and it's that which both of our readings today hinge around.

We all know how necessary it is that we reach out to people today – this is the point in the sermon where I'm supposed to point you to some very depressing statistics showing a drop in attendance levels, but I'm not going to – we're all doomed! Doomed!.

Well I'm not - I'm going to give you some statistics, but I think they should be positive. The Church of England recently produced a report called *From Anecdote to Evidence* looking at church growth. They found that of the churches they surveyed who had a clear sense of mission, 64% reported growth – 64%. Of the churches they surveyed who did not have a clear sense of mission 26% reported growth. 64%, 26% If we want to see the Kingdom of God grow here in Henleaze, in Bristol and in this Country, there is a far greater chance of succeeding if we're intentional about it; if we're deliberately seeking to do it rather than just hoping it will happen, and that intentionality is something that each and every one of us has to do.

But it's not easy, is it? There's a reason why the Diocese has named its Theme for the Year 'creating confidence in evangelism' – it's difficult. I probably shouldn't admit this, but why not! - the letter to the Bishop has already been sent – I don't feel comfortable doing it. It involves making myself vulnerable to ridicule, it involves making myself sound different from the rest of society, it involves talking about faith, which as we all know is a very un-British thing to do. So if I am to do it, I need all the help I can get, including the example of others; and this passage is one of them.

It's obvious when you think about it, but most of the Bible is about talking to people who know the context – the prophets largely spoke to the people of Israel, people who knew about God and what he had done for His people; Jesus spoke to the Jews of his time who would know the background of what he was saying (although a lot did not necessarily understand that at the time). There would be a certain amount of familiar

territory – an understanding of what you were saying, of what the references were. In this country there is still a certain amount of “Cultural Christianity” – people who may vaguely remember the words to the Lord’s Prayer or a hymn they used to sing during school assemblies, but those numbers are dropping fast – we cannot rely on people remembering even that, so when we get a passage like the one in Acts today, one where Paul is addressing people who have no knowledge of our faith, then we need to pay close attention – because this is where we are.

Paul is in Athens. Centre of sophistication, culture and superior knowledge. Traditionally, the culture of Greece had a huge number of different gods and goddesses. They believed that these deities would jump in, meddle with the affairs of us mere mortals (sometimes helpfully, sometimes not) and then jump out again. There was no sense of good – the gods would just do what they wanted rather than do what they ought to. People would build shrines to them in the hope that this would get the god’s attention and some sort of favour bestowed on them (it’s basically the ancient Greek equivalent of writing to a celebrity in the hope of getting an autographed photograph in reply, or perhaps these days tweeting them in the hope of getting a retweet).

Paul also knew that belief in this was dropping a bit. The true ‘intellectual’ in the society knew, of course, that all that talk of gods was just about sky-faries and metaphors to explain things that happened in the world. Everyone knows that the intellect, rationality and science are the real truths.

. The society thought itself to be religious, but the actual content of faith was losing its hold on it. Does that sound familiar?

Paul sees this society, a society that would be completely alien to what he was and where he had come from – he was a Jew, his society believed in Yahweh – a God who was good, not a God who just did what he felt like – it would have appalled him. You can just imagine how tempted he must have been to just stand up in that market place and denounce them all for what they were. But he didn’t.

(FACE LEFT) “you see that shrine over there? The one to the unknown god?” (FACE RIGHT) “yes I do – that’s over there because, well, you see I’m quite a spiritual person, I think there might be something out there, but I’m not really sure what”. Does that sound familiar – have you seen the some of the shops in Glastonbury recently? (FACE LEFT) “well....”

Paul at this point does something unexpected. He acknowledges the shrine. He meets them by moving into their way of thinking. (FACE LEFT) “You’re right – there is an unknown god”, but then he twists their thinking to point them in a new direction – towards Jesus Christ.

Paul addresses their scepticism – gods don’t ‘live in shrines made by human hands’ – to cynical minds his comments would make perfect sense; Paul acknowledges their searching - you realise that something is missing, that’s why you’re groping around trying all these different things out; and Paul understands their culture – enough to quote from their own writer. He doesn’t just write off the culture, but instead finds what connections he can – acknowledges when they get it right and acknowledges when he can learn from it. He then takes all these things and uses them to point to something completely new – towards that (POINT TO ALTAR), towards the truth of the resurrection of Christ.

In our society today we have countless examples of these unknown gods – things society pays homage to, sometimes not even realising it. Consumerist gods, gambling gods, gods of greed, gods of ‘spirituality’, gods of scepticism – you will have been living and working in Henleaze much longer than I have, you will know what they are much more than I do. We must do what Paul did – not simply stand up and condemn them,

but instead acknowledge them, “yes, but...” and steer them towards Christ. Because what Paul realised, and what he said there was that while in our gropings we may get a glimpse of the real God – be it in creation and nature, be it in the action of others – we don’t know him fully except through that cross and that empty tomb. And that’s what our mission ought to point to.

Paul didn’t do this on his own though – he couldn’t do this on his own. He did it through and with the Holy Spirit. That same Advocate Christ promised to his disciples – the Spirit of truth that dwelt in the Disciples, in Paul and in us. And that’s what can give me – what gives you – the confidence to do it, to get over those feelings I expressed earlier.

That’s not necessarily to say it will all be plain sailing. If we do it, what sort of impact may we see? Well, to be honest possibly the same as happened to Paul. If you read on to the next verses, from 32 – when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, “we will hear you again about this”. At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers....”

So there is no 100% success rate – there never is, but there are successes. And I believe that we can and will see them here too – in Henleaze, in Bristol and in this Country. Because just like the disciples in our Gospel passage today – in a time of uncertainty as to what the future may bring – we have the assurance of the presence of God in the Holy Spirit and the hope of eternity through the resurrection of Christ.

Let us pray,

“I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow”. Almighty father, we know that all we are and do is through and for you. Through your Holy Spirit give us the strength to plant seeds here in our community, from which you can continue to grow your Church.

Amen