

'Is WhatsApp the new Areopagus?!'

Sermon for Easter 6 by Mark Pilgrim: Acts 17.16-33 and John 14.15-17

At my mother's funeral last October, my two sisters and I were thrilled to be joined by ten cousins on my mother's side. Coming from the other side of England, from Scotland, from Boston, USA and from Vancouver, we feel remarkably close despite seeing each other sometimes only once every ten years. So, it wasn't a surprise when, at the beginning of lockdown we expanded the What's App group my sisters and I had with our trans-Atlantic cousins to include our cousins in Scotland and the rest of the country too.

Like WhatsApp groups across the country, sometimes our chat is serious and sometimes it's really silly: sometimes we have medical discussions (two are doctors and one a physio); sometimes we are swapping humorous videos from other people. Frequently we scratch our heads saying: 'Can you believe what Trump has done now?'

All of us cousins grew up in committed Christian households. Every single one of our parents was either ordained or actively involved in an Anglican church locally and nationally. So, it's interesting when we meet that, while green issues and social justice are high on the agenda, God and Christianity never seem to be mentioned, unless someone thinks to ask specifically about my work. This, I have to say, rarely happens. When it does, I find myself talking with some trepidation. 'Will they relate to or sympathise with anything I am saying?' I ask myself. 'Our spiritual reference points seem so different, I'm afraid we just won't understand each other' is the fear lurking at the back of my mind. This is a live issue for me as I await a Zoom chat with all these members of my family at 5.30 this afternoon. Questions about the meaning of life and how we are handling the current situation are bound to come up. This afternoon is one of those rare occasions I could tell my dearly loves sisters and cousins how they are dearly loved by God in Christ.

'How does this relate to our readings from scripture today?' you might well be asking yourself (*Bible passages are at end of sermon*). Well, what if I shared two snippets from our trans-Atlantic WhatsApp group last week?

On Tuesday evening, in the middle of talking about good books to read, my Canadian cousin Catherine wrote 'Just started an online four week Stoic Mindfulness and Resilience training course. Fellow from Scotland now living in Nova Scotia runs it. He wrote on the Guardian a couple of weeks ago about Stoicism in a time of pandemic.' And she gave the Guardian internet link for us all to be able to look it up. Immediately I found myself thinking 'What can I suggest, in this context, to offer a God-centred, constructive alternative to the humanly limited wisdom of classical philosophy Stoicism?'

I have read about Stoicism and its similarities and differences to Christianity. Could I say something now? Within minutes my keen WhatsApping cousin Anthony in Glasgow responded to Catherine. He had read the article and said, 'Looks interesting' ...but what interested him was references in the article to Roman in Scotland! Could I say something distinctive – something which gently and encouragingly offered a Christian perspective? I decided to think about it overnight. Then the next morning my sister Alison responds: 'Catherine – that sounds great. I do a mindfulness practice most mornings at present if I'm not doing yoga which is mindful of course!' Then the WhatsApp conversation immediately returns to discussion of authors and books enjoyed in the past now being re-read. The moment for me to put in some kind of good word for God and Christianity seemed, to me at least, to have gone. What if I had described contemplative prayer as, in my experience, the best form of 'mindfulness? What if I had recommended Benedictine or Franciscan or Trappist approaches to dealing well with the pressures of life? Would anyone listen, would anyone look them up? My fear is that my family would think 'What is Mark going on about? That Christian stuff is his 'thing': it has nothing to do with me or us'.

What would the apostle Paul have done in these circumstances? Well, we have a pretty good idea because Luke tells us what Paul did in Athens. Surrounded by gods of all kinds in mid first century Athens, Paul speaks publicly and provocatively in favour of Christianity and the Risen Jesus. Amazingly, Paul was in dialogue with the same school of philosophy that is attracting my cousin Catherine. Luke describes Paul as debating specifically with Stoic philosophers.

Stoicism believes, in its fullest classical guise, that Creation has been brought into being by God – but a God who is impersonal, distant and uninvolved in human affairs. God, according to Stoicism, has set the clock of creation going: but it is entirely up to human beings to find meaning, peace and fulfilment in Creation. And the way to do this, says Stoicism, is through reason and control of our emotions. In classical Stoicism, reason and emotional control are paramount; and if a person cannot reason well or find tranquillity through controlling their emotions, they seem to be seen as ‘defective’...lesser human beings. So, attractive as Stoicism might be for 21st century people looking for resilience, its full working out can have worrying associations with the eugenics practiced by Fascists of the 20th century, whose re-emergence we must resist in this century.

The seeming positives and the hidden negatives of Stoicism, whether in 21st century Western culture or 1st century Greece, raise profound ethical questions for us in our own day. If a philosophy or religion has both positive and negative outcomes (and which of them, including Christianity, doesn't?), how far should we go? Is there a line in the sand for us to draw in our relationship with them and their influence on us? The positives and negatives we have identified in Mindfulness and Stoicism aren't confined to them. They appear in other fields too. Yoga and Buddhism, Judo and Martial Arts with the abuse of violence also come to mind. As in 1st century Athens, there are still many things to attract 21st century people which, from a Christian perspective, lead away from the fulness of life we believe God wants the whole world to experience through belief in and relationship with Jesus Christ.

So: in Athens Paul stepped into the Areopagus to explain his faith in Jesus Christ. At 5.30 this afternoon I will step into a trans-Atlantic Zoom meeting and, courtesy of a WhatsApp conversation, will have an opportunity to compare Stoicism and Christianity. What will I do? What should I say?

Each one of us will have the chance to say how the virus and lockdown is affecting them right now. What if I were to say to my family ‘You know that reference to Stoic Mindfulness you made last week, Catherine, and what you said, Alison, about Yoga...it became the springboard for my sermon this morning. Our reading from the Acts of the Apostles described Paul telling people in Athens that our ultimate human fulfilment is to be found above all – in fact, uniquely - in relationship and belief in the crucified and risen Christ. And in our reading from the Gospel of John, Jesus promises his followers the gift of the Holy Spirit which encapsulates the dynamic and personal nature of the God whose human face is Jesus. ‘Cousins’, I long to say, ‘God is real. God isn't far off. God is love. God is behind the love that we have for one another. God is with us now, waiting for us to turn our minds, our hearts, our hands God's way. Do that – turn to God revealed in Christ and you can experience the peace you are looking for.’

So, I ask you, dear St Peter's: pray for me. Pray that I might say something like this to commend God in Christ over all humanly limited philosophies and practices like Stoicism and Yoga... beneficial as they might be in part - this afternoon. Then, next week, let's tell each other what transpires when we commend to others the fulfilment found by following Christ through the pain and mess of this world and its current pandemic, to experience the new life and resurrection authentically revealed, we believe, in Christ alone. Amen.

Acts 17.16-33

¹⁶ While Paul was... in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the market-place ^[h] every day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ Also some Epicurean and **Stoic** philosophers debated with him. Some said, ‘What does this babblers want to say?’ Others said, ‘He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.’ (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) ¹⁹ So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, ‘May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰ It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.’ ²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

²² Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³ 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. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶ From one ancestor^[i] he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷ so that they would search for God^[i] and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸ For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring.”

²⁹ 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. ³⁰ While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ 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.’

³² When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, ‘We will hear you again about this.’ ³³ At that point Paul left them. ³⁴ But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

John 14.15-17

¹⁵ ‘If you love me, you will keep^[i] my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate,^[g] to be with you for ever. ¹⁷ This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in^[h] you.