

Acts 17:16-34

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[0 : 00] Do turn to Act 17. Act 17. And it will probably be four weeks. I think sometimes it's easier to get into a chapter than a whole book. And before we kick off, it's prayer meeting on Wednesday. So we're on Zoom still for prayer meeting. It's been great that actually more people have been able to gather with us in prayer meeting in that way. We do come this Wednesday at 8pm.

So what I want to do this morning is I just want to set the scene really. It's not as structured as it normally is. I want to spend most of our time the next couple of weeks looking at the sermon itself perhaps, taking it point by point, going through the great points that Paul makes in this sermon as he speaks to the city of Athens.

But really what I want to do this morning is I want to look at what the city of Athens has got to say to Paul, first of all. Because before Paul even opened his mouth, before Paul said anything to the city of Athens, the city of Athens had got quite a lot to say to Paul and it made quite an impression on him.

We're told there in verse 16 of Acts 17, if we take that as our text, that while Paul was waiting for them in Athens, while he's on his city break in Athens, his spirit was provoked within him.

As he saw that the city was full of idols. I don't think I've met anyone who would admit to being a philosopher.

[1 : 35] People don't admit to that today. And yet we're all philosophers of some sort. Anyone who's got a point of view that they want to get across is a philosopher.

Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells is as much of a philosopher as Bertrand Russell or Jean-Paul Sartre. Anybody who's been tempted to write in to the editor, to ring up a phone in, or to shout at the radio, is a philosopher of sorts.

We've all, each one of us, have got an approach to life, from the youngest to the oldest. All of us have got a point of view. I think there are even fewer people who like to be thought of as religious. I ask people, you're Christian, oh I wouldn't call myself religious. Do you go to church? Oh no, I'm not religious. But if your view of the world includes God, or for that matter even leaves him out, you are religious.

Atheism is a religion. Atheism requires just as much faith to disbelieve in God. As to believe in God.

[2 : 45] And so in a sense this morning, we're all philosophers, and we're all religious people, whether we want to admit it or not. And there may be differences in how well thought out you are, and thought through you are, how well expressed your views are.

But each one of us will have a view of life, a point of view. Each one of us will have a philosophy. Every one of us has got a religion of some sort. And the question is, how do we know who's right, and how do we know who is wrong?

And actually, does it really matter anyway? As long as you're sincere. Isn't that the big thing? As long as it means something to you, that's the big deal. What does it matter what you believe?

If your religion is a help and a comfort to you, well that's what counts anyway. That's the kind of thing I'm told all the time. I hear that a lot.

Well, Paul, we all worship the same God, really, at the end of the day. Allah is just another name for God, isn't it? All religions lead along the same path.

[3 : 49] All religions lead to the same place in the end. That's the air that we breathe. And very often, we're put in our place. And when you say, well, hang on a minute, no, that isn't actually true.

They say, well, nobody's got a monopoly on the truth. It's sheer arrogance, isn't it, for you to think that you have the truth. Every single one of us has got our different insights.

And what we've got to do is we've got to throw them all into the kind of melting pot. And that is the kind of new enlightened way of thinking. There's nothing new under the sun.

There's nothing new under the sun. Because that would describe exactly the attitude that the Apostle Paul faced in Acts 17. 20 centuries ago, when he turned up in Athens, he faced the same attitude that you and I face today.

So look at verse 21. Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

[4 : 53] It was like stepping into a supermarket. You know one of the giant supermarkets? There's one, isn't there, in Austerle there. And you go, it's absolutely massive on two levels.

A giant supermarket. And going to Athens was like going to a giant religious supermarket. It wasn't kind of a Lidl or an Aldi.

It wasn't a kind of Tesco even. It was kind of more upper class philosophical supermarket. It was more kind of a bit above Waitrose. Kind of Fortnum or Mason.

The greatest thinkers in the history of the world used to peddle their philosophy in the marketplace of Athens. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle. All the great thinkers were there. But of course that was in the past.

That was long gone. And so when now Paul turns up in the philosophical supermarket of Athens, there's just well-known brand names. There's just the Epicureans and the Stoics.

[5 : 52] And the Epicurean approach to life was, well, life is to be enjoyed. And so enjoy it. And the Stoic approach was quite the opposite. Life was to be endured.

So just endure it. Endure it. And you pay your money and you take your choice. And so in Athens, it's estimated there are about 3,000 different shrines when Paul visited it.

It's a little bit like rural Wales. And when I was growing up, it's not the same yet. But still the same in some parts of Mid Wales. You go to the little villages and there are as many chapels as there are pubs. There's a chapel on every street corner.

Now there are carpet warehouses or different things. But in Athens, there was a shrine on every street corner. Any amount of choice. It was like a supermarket full of philosophy and religion.

And you paid your money and you got your choice. And whatever happened to grab your fancy, whatever kind of religion you might like, whatever suits you, whatever kind of God you wanted to believe in, well, there was plenty of choice in Athens.

[6 : 58] And that's how it was. You could shop around for a God or a religion. And so I think this passage has got a great deal to say to you and I when we live in a multicultural, multi-faith society.

This passage has got a great deal to say to us about what is the place of the gospel of Jesus Christ in society today. It says a lot to us about how we're to conduct ourselves as Christians in a multi-faith, multicultural society.

And so I want to look this morning at Paul before we come to what he's got to say. And so let's see, how did Paul behave himself in that kind of society?

Look at verse 16. First of all, Paul is pained. He is pained. Now while Paul was waiting for them in Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.

He's got a few days off. He's got time to kill. He does a little bit of tourism. He's waiting for his friends, Silas and Timothy, to catch up with him. And so he goes sightseeing in Athens, like you may have.

[8 : 10] And we're told he waited in Athens and his spirit was stirred up within him. His spirit was provoked within him. Why? It's a really strong expression. He was pained and angered by what he saw to the very depths of his being.

Now why was that? Why was it when he went around Athens that there was something within him that pained him to the very depths of his being? I think there's two reasons. First of all, he stirred in his heart by the plight of the people.

By the plight of the people because he could see that for all their sophistication, for all their philosophy, and for all their religion, they just didn't know God.

So just look at verses 22 and 23. Paul says, For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found there also an altar with this inscription, For as I wandered around the city, your beautiful city, I found there also an altar with this inscription, to the unknown God.

As I wandered around the city, your beautiful city, I found something that sums it up for me. As I wandered around the streets of Athens, I came across an altar to the unknown God.

[9 : 39] And that says it all, doesn't it, Athenians? Because here were people that prided themselves on their philosophy, the greatest thinkers that the world has ever seen lived in Athens

through the centuries, but for all their philosophy and all their religion, these people, they were ignorant of God.

They didn't know God. And not only were they ignorant of God, but it does seem, doesn't it, that there's an uneasy awareness amongst them in their hearts and in their consciences.

They're aware that they're not right with this God that there is. And so Paul says, doesn't he, I found, can you see it in verse 23, an altar. And I think that must be significant.

He doesn't say, I saw a plaque on a wall. He doesn't say, I saw a statue. He doesn't say, I saw a pedestal or some monument to the unknown God, but I saw an altar.

What does an altar speak of? It speaks of sacrifice. An altar speaks of atonement. And so that is common to all the religions of the world, the need to get right with God through sacrifice.

[10 : 45] And Paul says, as I wandered through your beautiful city, for all your philosophy and for all your religion, you don't know God, do you? You don't know God.

And you're not right with God. And it may be that you've come here this morning or you're watching on the internet and you've got a point of view and you've got an approach to life and you've got a philosophy to life and maybe you're religious, you're very religious and yet God is not real to you. He's an idea in your head but you don't know Him. And you know that you don't know Him. And you can talk about Him maybe.

That's perhaps why you're here. But you don't know Him and God is a stranger to you. And not only are you ignorant of His presence in your life and not only is He distant and vague and far away but also you know in your heart of hearts that things actually are not right between you and God.

And there's a problem between you and God and you know that that's there. And that is how it was in Athens. And as Paul realized that he was moved to the depth of his being because of it.

[12 : 03] Because he saw people were without God and they were without hope in this world. And they had religion up to the eyeballs but they didn't have God. They were lost.

That's the Bible word that sums it up of course. They were lost. And they were lost in terms of a relationship with God. It's like the little boy in the supermarket.

The little boy in the supermarket his mother was chatting or looking at something and he's wandered off and he's lost. He's lost touch with her and so he walks the aisles of the supermarket and this little boy he's lost and he's crying.

And in the end one of the staff kind of picks him up and the manager is called for to sort things out and the manager asks the little boy who's lost in crime where do you live?

And the boy can tell him where he lives. He's got his address memorized. He's learned it off by heart and the little boy knows his way home. And the little boy would know which bus to catch.

[13 : 04] But he's lost isn't he still? He's not lost in terms of his surroundings. He knows where he is but he's lost in terms of his relationship to his mum. He's lost touch with her.

He's lost in terms of relationship with the person that matters most in his life his mother. And she's not there anymore. And he is lost and he feels lost and that's exactly how it is in this city this morning.

That we are lost and the human race is lost not in terms of our surroundings not in terms of our environment. We're able to understand aren't we and explain the world in which we live better than any other people in history.

We're not lost in terms of our surroundings but we are lost in terms of our relationship to God. Paul is stirred and he's provoked in his spirit and as he thinks about that as he tramps around the streets of Athens the culture capital of the world with something new and exciting on every street corner with towering architecture and magnificent sculpture and awe-inspiring temples and great libraries and centers of learning his spirit is stirred by the spiritual tragedy of the city.

A city that is so wise and yet so ignorant. So rich in culture and yet so poor in spirit.

[14 : 33] spirit. And that is our world today. And as we walk around this city our spirit as God's people should be stirred at the plight of men and women and boys and girls.

That for all their philosophy and all their sophistication and all their religion they are ignorant of God. And they're under God's judgment and their sin is unatoned for and they are lost and without hope and without God.

And I'm sure that Paul was stirred with compassion for the people. Like our Lord Jesus saw the multitudes and he said they are like sheep without a shepherd.

And Jesus saw people didn't he in a way that we often don't see them. He saw them as sheep without a shepherd and there's nothing more pathetic is there than a sheep without a shepherd. Who does this belong to?

There's no one. But there's another reason why I think Paul's spirit was pained and not only because of the plight of his people of the people of Athens but also because of the glory of God. [15:44] As Paul wandered around the city of Athens he saw all the evidences of religion all the kind of manifestations of religion and all of people's religious instincts and his spirit was stirred and provoked to anger even to indignation but provoked out of concern for his father in heaven also.

Like David the psalmist where he says oh that men would praise the Lord oh that people would praise the Lord. I think in the heart of every Christian there is that cry isn't there? That as we watch the news as we read the internet oh that oh that people would praise the Lord. That's the answer to their issues. Oh that men women who are made in the likeness of God would stop their idolatry and their hero worship and praise the Lord for his goodness. There's a cry that the psalmist knew that you were made to live and worship and to glorify and to enjoy God.

I've told you the situation of the ugly duckling and so the ugly duckling he's upset isn't he? Why is he upset? Because he's not like the other ducklings and he looks like the ugly duckling and he feels a lack of self worth because he's an ugly duckling but what was the problem with the ugly duckling? [17:17] What was the problem with the ugly duckling? Do you know? Do you know that story? What do you reckon? What was it, Ellie? He didn't know who he was. Who was he?

Who was the ugly duckling? He was a swan, wasn't he? And so we live in a city where people live like ugly ducklings but actually they're swans.

They were made to glorify and enjoy God and yet they live kind of as earthlings, as ducklings. and it should grieve us that men and women and boys and girls may to honor their father in heaven have no relationship with their father in heaven.

We're told that his spirit was provoked. Verse 16 The city is given over to idols. We don't often do this but I want us to go to Romans 1. Let's go and try and tease this out. What is idolatry? Because I think Romans 1 is the great chapter on idolatry. Maybe you think that idolatry is something that belongs in the past. Let me read to you from Romans 1.

[18:21] Let me read to you from Romans 1 just the next book on from verse 18. For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

For what can be known about God is plain to them because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes namely his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world and the things that have been made.

So they are without excuse for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him but they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise they became fools. And they exchanged! the glory of God and they worshipped and served the creature rather than the creator who is blessed forever.

and I think you see there are two great definitions of idolatry. What is idolatry? Number one it is to make God in man's image.

[19:29] It is to make God in man's image. And that is what they have done. That is what they have done in Athens. They have made mental images and we laugh at that don't we?

We think that is ridiculous. We think it is ridiculous to make a saucepan and use a bit for a saucepan but then take the same piece of metal and fashion it into a god and worship it and bow down to it.

We know that is ridiculous. We laugh at that. But actually we live in an age where people say all the time well I like to think of God like this. And you talk to them about the God of the Bible and they say well no that is not the God I believe in.

What is that? That according to the Bible is idolatry. We are not so daft are we to make a God of stone or metal or wood but we hammer out our own idea of God and we make God in our image like a kind of glorified version of us.

And that is idolatry. And so the God that lots of people worship is like that great big Cheshire cat in Alice in Wonderland with just one big smile and nothing else. And that is the God that people like to

believe in but it is not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[20 : 41] Idolatry is to make God in our image but the other thing that Paul says which is so helpful in verse 25 is that they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the creator who is blessed forever.

They worshipped and served the creature rather than the creator. That is idolatry. And so that means to live for things is idolatry.

And that is to find your happiness and your goal and your meaning for life within the created order within this world is idolatry. And so good things that God has given to us to enjoy can become idols can't they?

So think of for some it might be the family. The family is a good gift from God but the family being happy that is life.

And so if the family aren't happy my life kind of falls apart. And that shows us doesn't it? It's idolatry. To look for an explanation of a human existence and you think well if I got this or if I get that job or I get that wife or I get that husband or I get that relationship that will make everything alright.

[22 : 08] The Bible says that's idolatry. Because you're looking at creation. You're looking at creating order rather than the creator. And so work can become the be all and the end all isn't it?

And my fulfillment and work that becomes the great thing or a house or whatever it may be. And if it is touched and if it is affected then my life collapses.

The Bible tells us that's an idol. To look to creation and try to find the meaning for existence is idolatry. And once your eyes are fixed on this world rather than the creator of this world you'll find idolatry there.

And so what's the difference in real terms? What am I trying to say to you? I'm trying to say to you first century Athens 21st century UK there's no difference. And so as Paul saw what was going on in Athens it pained him and it provoked him and it angered him.

And so again as we look at our world today it should pain us that Christianity is taught on a par with every other Christian religion. It should anger us. We all worship the same God don't we? Allah is just another name for God.

[23 : 23] that should make us indignant that should fill us with a holy anger. Oh that people could really know who the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is.

What are we to do about it? And let me just finish with this the third thing what does Paul do? He's pained he's provoked what does Paul do? And I want you to see what he does and what he doesn't do.

We're told in verse 17 that while he waited in Acts 17 while he waited his spirit is provoked and then verse 17 he reasoned with them.

Can you see that? He reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons. He's provoked he saw the plight of the people he saw and knew something of the reputation and the glory of God and because of that pressure on his heart and spirit he reasoned in the synagogue he spoke.

Earlier on in chapter 17 he's been chased out of the synagogue by an angry mob and so for him it's quite dangerous to go to the synagogue. He looked at Athens he saw the idolatry he felt for the people he's concerned about God and so he moves out and he speaks.

[24 : 38] He reasons. He doesn't shy away. He doesn't go into the ghetto. He doesn't keep his head down. He goes to the marketplace where people's thoughts and philosophies are being formed where people are influenced and he contends.

He doesn't sit back and he reasons and he speaks the word of God. And I think it's a really sorry thing when the church just sits there and takes the punches and waits to be asked to speak.

it has been disgraceful I think that Christian leaders have sounded like health and safety experts during COVID and not preaching the gospel and not proclaiming the claims of Christ.

But just notice with me what he doesn't do and I love this what does he refuse to do? He refuses to toss the gospel into the melting pot. He refuses to say it's just one of the options he's on a par with everything else.

Let me read to you from verses 19. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus saying may we know what this new teaching is that you're presenting for your brain some strange things to our ears we wish to know therefore what these things mean and all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something

new and then verse 22 so Paul standing in the midst of the Areopagus said men of Athens I perceive that in every way you're very religious for as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship I followed also an altar with this inscription to the unknown God what therefore you worship is unknown this I proclaim to you the God who made the world and everything in it being Lord of heaven and earth he doesn't live in temples made by man he says to them doesn't he you don't know what you're talking about you're absolutely clueless let me tell you you're ignorant of God and you know that you're ignorant of God because I found an altar saying to the unknown God and you admit it you don't know God so let me tell you about him and Paul isn't the slightest but impressed by their learning or intimidated by it he's not threatened by it and he doesn't say well let me give you my point of view the gospel isn't the point of view the gospel is the truth of God and they say but no one has got a monopoly on the truth and Paul says listen you don't know what you're talking about you've not got a clue let me tell you about him he's not the slightest but intimidated or threatened by the great intellectuals of Athens and look at verse 29 he says doesn't he verse 29 being then

[27 : 23] God's offspring we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone there's something marvelous about that you oughtn't to think of God like that he's talking to the greatest brains in all the world the philosophers of Athens the greatest intellectuals of the age and he says you've not got a clue and I think you know that kind of pressure you know what it is don't you to be threatened and intimidated like Paul could have been but do you know what it is to have the confidence in the gospel Paul could have taken them on their own ground he could have spoken philosophically to them he was bright enough he was trained like they were he was an intelligent man but just look with me as we close what was his message his message was don't you love it at the end of verse 18 Jesus and the resurrection Jesus and the resurrection he's not intimidated he's not afraid he's got confidence in the message was he open to misunderstanding yeah they misunderstood him verse 18 they think he's speaking about two different gods a kind of twin deity they totally misunderstood him and people misunderstand us he was the object of contempt and ridicule what does this babblers say verse 18 but he knows that what these people need to hear is not philosophy and it's not mere religion but what these people need to hear is that the gospel is about the God the only God that there is the one true living God who's revealed himself in a man named Jesus that is the message that God has made himself known in time and space in Jesus Christ and how do we know that that is the message well because God has raised him from the dead and God has singled

Jesus Christ out of all of humanity and he singled him out from all the great gurus and all the great philosophers of the ages and God has singled him out by raising him from the dead and so Paul told them about Jesus and the resurrection and he wouldn't be shifted from it and that is the message we proclaim to our multicultural multi-faith society let's pray of the Holocaust and the and the and the Holocaust and the Holocaust and the Holocaust and the and the Holocaust and the and the and the and the Holocaust and the and the Holocaust Holocaust