

Sermon: Acts 17:22-31 (SMO:21 MAY 17)

Are you religious? Someone asked me that once, and I hesitated for an answer. The problem is that 'religious' means different things to different people, doesn't it? And according to our first bible reading today, being 'very religious' is not actually much use. In fact, someone can be religious, and yet ignorant of the very thing they worship.

So let me ask you a different question. Would you call yourself a Christian?

If so, how would you explain the Christian gospel, the Christian message? How would you summarise it for the person next door in five minutes? Would you start by talking about the church building and services and the stained glass windows? Church traditions and architecture, sculptures and carving? Or would you start somewhere else?

Because again, 'Christian' means different things to different people. Some people who call themselves Christians, if you scratch the surface, honour their religion rather than God. They're more impressed by the trappings of their religion than they are by God himself. They don't really **know** God or the Jesus of the Bible - they effectively worship an unknown god - they are ignorant.

Their religion, their worship, their Christianity, is hollow. They are like the people of Athens we heard about in our first bible reading this morning.

This issue of hollow worship, of ignorance in worship, is what Paul tackles head on. It would help me a lot if you could turn to our reading in the pew bibles. It's on page 1051 (page 1963 of the large print bibles). Page 1051, Acts 17, starting at verse 22. Because what God had to say through Paul's sermon to the people of Athens, he also has to say to us today through this passage.

Paul has arrived in Athens - that powerhouse of wonderful architecture and sculpture; of philosophy and medicine, theatre, debate and public speaking; the cradle of democracy. Yet it's striking that Paul is not in the slightest bit awed by all this - far from it! Rather than be impressed, Paul goes into a full frontal assault.

Asked to present his gospel in formal session to the people of Athens, Paul says to them in verse 22, "**People of Athens!**" he says, "**I see that in every way you are very religious.**" Yet in the very next verse 23 he also finds them profoundly ignorant - "**So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship – and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.**"

Paul is going to proclaim the gospel to the people of Athens. He's going to proclaim it to them because they are ignorant. Their religion is hollow. That's why the gospel must be proclaimed throughout the world - because until they hear it, people throughout the world are ignorant.

Pretty brave, isn't it, to call these people ignorant? When he says they're ignorant, Paul's not saying that they don't know anything. They know a lot, but they don't know the most important thing of all, they don't **know** the god they worship.

Three things for us, then, from Paul's gospel proclaiming:

1) "**God does not live in temples built by human hands**". (verse 24)

Just as 'he is not served by human hands' (v.25). Now, this might seem obvious. We know God does not live in the temples of Athens, the Acropolis or the Parthenon. Just as he doesn't live in mosques or hindu temples. But do we draw the conclusion that he doesn't live in church buildings either? They can be elegant, beautiful. But they're all built by human hands.

Are we tempted sometimes to forget this? To regard our church building as "a house of God" - as if it were somehow holier than other buildings?

Even within the church building, are we tempted to think of some areas as more holy than others - as if God is up by the altar but not down in the pews with the congregation? We might even question why we call it the altar - altars aren't necessary any more because Jesus has made the supreme sacrifice, once for all. No more sacrifices are necessary, so there's no need for altars.

And we refer to "priests" in the church, even though there's no need for priests. A priest was a go-between between people and God. God was not accessible to ordinary people and they needed priests to make sacrifices to God on their behalf - as with the bulls and goats we read about in our psalm this morning. But since Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice, we now have direct access to God himself - we don't need to go via a priest or anyone else. God, as Paul says in verse 27, "is not far from any one of us." That is what Jesus has accomplished for us. We no longer need priests - Jesus is our great High Priest. God's people are now a 'nation of priests.'

There's no more need for sacrifices, no more need for altars, no more need for priests. Yet these things creep into our lives almost unnoticed, don't they?

This might sound like arguing about words - what's in a name? And don't misunderstand me - there's nothing wrong with being respectful in church. It's good to have sober and sometimes solemn services as well as celebrations. But you see how easy it is to be like the people of Athens - to honour the things we have built and made and designed and worship in, instead of honouring the God who made us. And then our religion becomes hollow.

God does live in a temple - but it's a temple made by God - his temple is his people, the congregation of Christians throughout the world. That's what we mean when we say we are the body of Christ. We are God's temple.

God does not live in temples built by human hands.

2) God is not like images "made by human design and skill" (verse 29)

Again, this might seem obvious. We look at ancient bronze idols or masks, or the gold and silver and stone images made by the people of Athens, or the paintings and sculptures of hindu gods and think, "obviously God isn't like that."

But what about the images we have in our churches? What about the crucifixes we see - images of Jesus on a cross with a neat little loin cloth in just the right place - as if Jesus was crucified with a loin cloth on! Do we recognize them for what they are - images made by human design and skill?

Are they really any different from the images made by human design and skill which Paul talks about here? Are we sure they don't somehow creep into our subconscious as part of our worship and our image of what God is like?

You might have heard that story about a girl who went into a jeweller's shop asking for a neck chain with a cross on it. The attendant asked, "do you want a cross with a chap on it?" What a way to refer to the sacrifice of the Saviour of the world! A cross with a chap on it! Such is our state of ignorance today.

It's even possible to create images of God in our minds. Have you ever heard anyone say, "I like to think of God as like this..."? What's that if it's not idolatry, creating an idea of God in our minds, using our human design and skill and reasoning - and perhaps wishful thinking - to create an image of God in our mind?

God is not "like gold or silver or stone – an image made by human design and skill." So perhaps we should think carefully about the crucifixes and carvings and pictures and models we see - inside the church or outside it.

But if God is not like images "made by human design and skill" - what is he like?

3) "God...is Lord of heaven and earth" - God rules everything. (verse 24 again).

God is Lord of everything - that's what he's like. Please look with me at verses 25 and 26, at Paul's superb summary of God's rule over mankind, "he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands."

God is Lord of all.

This is the issue with the people of Athens. They surely know in their hearts that the idols and altars they bow down to aren't really God. But as long as they can pretend they are, they can doff their caps, as it were, to these so-called gods, as it suits them.

They can tick the religion box, then move on and get on with the rest of their lives. You see, by doing this, they remain in charge: they can control their gods, they can lord it over their gods, and make sure their gods aren't lord over them.

God's not having that, says Paul. He is Lord of heaven and earth. He is Lord over us.

Why has God "made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth"? So that we can live in relationship with him - verse 27: "God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him." God loves each of us as a father loves his child - indeed as Paul says in verse 27 and again in verse 28, "we are his offspring."

God loves us dearly, but he is also just. In his diary, there's a date when he will send Jesus to judge, justly. Verse 31, "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 everyone by raising him from the dead." Paul began his sermon to the people of Athens talking about God the Creator, and he ends it talking about God the Judge.

This is what God is like - he created us, he loves us as his children, but he is just - so he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed - Jesus Christ. And by the way, let's notice that God has given us proof of this. Many people like to claim that Christians have no evidence for our faith. This is quite WRONG! Our faith is based on evidence. And the supreme evidence, the clincher, and the climax of Paul's sermon, is that God raised Jesus from the dead.

What are we to do, then?

If the clear evidence tells us Jesus was raised from the dead and will return to judge, what are we to do? What is anybody to do?

We are to repent - verse 30, “**In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.**” Repent - that means to turn back, to turn to God and accept that we have been wrong to live life as we liked - and to start living life as God wants. To repent is to turn our lives over to God and let him be in charge. To fit our lives around what he wants, instead of trying to fit him into our lives as it suits us!

And notice that this is not a polite request from God - it's a command!

God wants us to look at him and see and know who he really is. We are to know:

- that he is the supreme Lord of all heaven and earth who will judge the world with justice;
- that he does not live in temples or any other things built by human hands;
- that he is not like models and images made by human design and skill;
- that he wants us to reach out for him
- that he commands us to repent.

So let us examine ourselves and our worship. What do we really honour and bow down to? Let us check honestly with ourselves that we do not venerate beautiful buildings and architecture, or man-made images, or pictures, or even some ideas of God we might have. Let us rather honour the real God who dwells among us through his Spirit - and whom we can know through Jesus, his Word.

Let us make sure the celebrations and traditions we might enjoy do not crowd out the real thing - our relationship with the living God, who is not far from any of us.

And let us repent when we fail, when we have gone our own way and not honoured God and treated him with respect, as Lord of all. When we have tried to fit God into our own priorities and lives, instead of designing our lives around him.

Let us look at the evidence God has provided, see that Jesus is Lord and Judge, repent and believe.

Because - and if you remember only one thing today, please make sure it's this! - because **When we know the real God and we repent and believe - then our relationship with God is renewed and restored. Then we need not fear his coming judgement, but can look forward to life forever with him.**

That is the true gospel of Jesus Christ. That is the gospel that people throughout the world need to hear. That is the gospel we have to proclaim.

Amen.