

17th May 2020, Sixth Sunday of Easter: Acts 17:16-17,22-28 & John 14:15-17 – God in our hearts

I wonder what is the greatest city you've visited? In our modern world, there are many such cities. I myself have lived most of my life in London, and I've been fortunate to visit some of the other great cities of the world: Paris, Rome, Sydney, Skegness. No doubt you spotted the deliberate mistake in the last sentence: Skegness is actually one of the world's greatest towns, it is still waiting for its long-overdue city status.

In our main passage for today, we find St. Paul in Athens, which was at the time the second greatest city on earth behind Rome, and unquestionably its greatest in terms of learning and culture. The city of Aristotle and Plato, a city most educated people of the time would have longed to visit. But I'm fascinated by Paul's response to this experience: what he saw, what he did and what he felt. What Paul *saw* was not a city full of extraordinary buildings and unparalleled learning, but a city full of idols. What he *felt* was not awe at its grandeur, but distress at its spiritual ignorance. What he *did* was dedicate himself to sharing the good news of Jesus.

One of the things that constantly inspires and challenges me about Paul is how he is determined to see everything with spiritual eyes, to go beneath the surface of human culture; and more than that, to devote himself to surrendering all of his life to God. Paul saw through the impressive facade to the real heart of Athens in the middle of the 1st century AD: a decaying culture with defective religious thought and practice.

And underlying this passage is a deeper issue, which challenges most of humanity's religious thought and practice. We human beings tend to create god or gods in our image, not the other way round: which means they're always too small, and need to be followed with particular rules and rituals in order to connect them with our lives. It effectively allows us to assume that our lives are still our own, and this god or these gods get as much of it as we're prepared to let them.

It means we can *operate with a framework of religion that says to god: 'This little bit of our lives is yours, but the rest is mine.'* So we put religion in a box – for some it's a big box, for others a small one, but it effectively divides life into the sacred and the secular. Certain things – rituals, rules, practices, buildings, leaders – are sacred, the rest are not.

And it's a trap that many of us still fall into today, even in the church – but St Paul is having none of it. His God, our God, the one true God, is not like this. He's not small or only concerned with a part of our lives. Notice how he begins the key section of his sermon: 'The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth.' **Our God is a great big God** – he made the whole world, the whole universe is suffused with his presence.

And notice the three radical implications of this statement which immediately follow: first, 'He does not live in temples built by human hands.' How could he? How could any building be big enough to house this God? We humans have certainly tried, and who can fail to be awe-inspired by some of those buildings? But God is bigger than all of them, he's not limited to certain places on earth or in our lives. There is no place on earth where Jesus can't say: 'This is mine.'

Second, he doesn't need anything. Or as Paul says: 'He is not served by human hands.' He doesn't need our libations or rituals to appease him or impress him. He is complete and whole within himself. We do all that stuff to try and make *ourselves* feel better, not God. And third, it is this God whose breath fills our lives: 'He gives everyone life and breath and everything else.'

The true God is not limited to certain places or rituals or buildings, to certain boxes and compartments in our lives. **He fills the whole universe, and all of our lives matter to him** – every breath, every thought, everything that matters to us matters to Him as well. Or as Paul summarises beautifully later in his speech: ‘In *him* we live and move and have our being.’ (REPEAT)

Imagine a life where every moment is filled with God’s presence; where he is with us the whole time. We can bring every worry to him, we can cry every tear with him, we can share every joy with him, we can celebrate every blessing knowing that he is smiling with us. This is not fiction or pie in the sky: it is the reality of what Jesus came to bring us. It is what he promised his friends in our gospel reading. ‘God’s Spirit – in other words his very breath, his presence – comes to dwell in us.’

So much of our Christian thinking focuses on the benefits of forgiveness and eternal life, and believe me those are amazing, and rightly get attention. But there is a third benefit which underpins them all: it is that **God comes close to us**, *we can experience what it is like to truly live with him in our lives all the time. What you might call the with-God life.*

Many of you have been following our daily inspiration, which has been looking at the implications of this with-God life over the last 30 or so days. It rests on these two wonderful truths: ‘You are one in whom Christ dwells... and you live in the strong and unshakeable kingdom of God.’ If you haven’t come across these yet, I commend them to you, they’re on the church website. The implications are profound: our life suddenly becomes not about what we do but about *who we are*, we can live as people of immense value, safe and secure, no longer driven by all the idols and insecurities which have often shaped our lives.

As I close, those of you who receive our church emails will know that this week I shared the fact that we will be continuing with online worship for the foreseeable future. Our buildings may not open for many weeks, and even when they do, many of you will rightly feel unsure of attending public worship. So I believe it is right to continue to offer this access to worship even after our buildings re-open, at least for a while.

And there are two ways of looking at that. Perhaps many of us started this online journey thinking: ‘well at least this is better than nothing.’ But I want to affirm that I am increasingly convinced that this is a prophetic call for the church to re-discover the truth of what St Paul knew all those years ago: that God does not live only in certain buildings. It is a call to rediscover that all of our lives matter to God and we can live with this God all the time.

I love Sunday worship, and I love offering comfort and inspiration to all who are seeking the Lord. But my primary call as a pastor is to help us all to develop a faith which is as deeply connected with our great God Monday to Saturday, and where Sunday meetings are principally there to celebrate all that God has been doing throughout the week.

This season is hard for all of us, but I believe it is also achieving one extraordinary prophetic vision for the church: and it is to reawaken our sense of what it means to walk with God all the week, to cultivate a faith which lives *everywhere*: at home, in our families, in our thought life, in our private prayer. I long to celebrate and sing with you all once again. But most of all, I want to see the church in this nation rise up again in our generation with this truth etched into every moment of every day of our lives, wherever we are: ‘In him we live and move and have our being.’ Amen.