

170521sermon notes

Last Sunday, the reading from John's gospel included the verse John 14: Jesus said "*I am the way, the truth, and the life*" I do not know how the worship group handled that reading but I would argue that it should not be heard as attempting to answer our questions about what to make of other religions. However today's readings would throw up some material that *was* dealing with other religions. The passage that deals with the question fairly directly is the one we heard from Acts chapter 17. Paul is in Athens, as he wanders around the city, he finds evidence of religious devotion everywhere; devotion to all kinds of different gods and all kinds of different faiths. He concludes that the people of Athens are a very religiously minded people. As if to confirm that impression, he is invited to meet with the Areopagus, a council of the most respected and distinguished thinkers in the city, and to explain to them what his faith is all about.

Gentleness and respect may not be the words that immediately jump to mind when you think of Paul, but it would be hard to fault him on this occasion. He begins by affirming the Athenians for their keen interest in religion. He quotes positively from two of their own respected poets. And far from telling them that their religions are all rubbish, he links his message directly to things he has observed in their own religious practice. He had found a shrine in the city dedicated to "the unknown god", and so he begins by suggesting that the faith he is there to talk about is not something strange and new, but rather it is the missing knowledge of a faith that is already within their experience.

Now that raises a question. Is this just a slick bit of marketing on Paul's part? Or is he actually speaking with honesty about some deep truths concerning the nature of God? Well, although I think the advertising industry would have been proud of the angle he took, I think that he meant what he said. The quote he uses from the Greek poet Epimenides is particularly instructive. "*In God we live and move and have our being.*" In using that quote, Paul is saying that no one, regardless of what they might or might not believe, is entirely cut off from God and removed from the influence of God. To live, to move, to be; all is surrounded by God and underpinned by God. A person's ability to walk across the room is as dependent on God as it is dependent on the oxygen that they breathe. Indeed Paul specifically says that although God wants to be sought out by us, God is not far from anyone and is within reach of everyone.

So Paul is recognising that the religious endeavours of people of other faiths are genuine attempts to reach out to God. And he is saying that God does not refuse their advances and insist that they get their doctrines spot on before having anything to do with them. But, says Paul, once you are aware of the alternatives, God does call you to make a choice to get your life on God's track. This does, I think, tally with what we heard Jesus say in the gospel reading when he made the rather exclusive sounding statement that the world cannot receive the Holy Spirit, because it neither sees or knows the Spirit, but that the disciples can and do. It seems that both are saying that there is something challenging about the gospel made known in Christ, something that demands a tough choice, something that does not simply allow people to add a bit of Christian faith to their lives and leave everything else unchanged. The demands of Christian discipleship will not be controlled to fit "the world". There comes a point in understanding when you are forced to choose one or the other. You can't have both.

So in Paul's speech, we find a mix of affirmation of other people's religious faith and a challenge to go beyond it and find something more. So where does that leave us in our view of other religions. Some people would at this point expect me to give an opinion on whether people can be saved through other religions, Well I don't think this passage addresses that question. But it does offer a stinging critique of much of the way Christians have treated people of other faiths, and it does challenge us to avoid any thoughts that we might have a monopoly on insight and experience of God.

Paul's speech is clearly asserting that there are people who do not know anything about Christ who are nevertheless reaching out for God and responding to God. And he also clearly implies that we cannot, so to speak, "take" Christ to them, because Christ is already among them. In God they live and move and have their being. This should come as no great surprise to us.

We believe in a God who takes the initiative and comes to us while we are still set on our own ways and unwilling to change. We believe in a God who takes flesh among us, who embodied himself in places where he may not be welcomed. We believe in a God who is present in ordinary things, in bread and wine and water, reaching out to us and asking us to offer ourselves in return. So it should be no great surprise to us that this God who is not far from anyone is present among people of other faiths, reaching out to them in the ordinary things around them. And so we would be horribly out of line if we were to barge in and begin denouncing other faiths and asserting the claims of our own without listening first and learning what Christ has been doing among them.

To me, there seems no obvious reason why people who are genuinely seeking God might not discern enough of God's response to turn their lives around and entrust themselves to God and so be accepted as God's people. I don't think the Bible either tells us that or rules it out. But what I am sure is that all of us — those who know the story of Christ and those who don't — will come closer to the truth and to understanding what God is calling us to as we listen to one another and allow one another's stories of grace to reveal God to us and challenge us to offer ourselves more fully into the hands of God. We have much to learn and much to offer.

So as we encounter the Christ here, let us go out ready to acknowledge and celebrate the Christ wherever and in whoever we encounter him, and to allow that recognition to call us and others to offer ourselves, ever more fully and consciously, into the hands of God.

Jesus asks us to follow him and we reply

*Lord, your summons echoes true
when you but call my name.*

*Let me turn and follow you
and never be the same.*

*In your company I'll go
where your love and footsteps show.*

*Thus I'll move and live and grow
in you and you in me.*