

SERMON - 17 MAY 2020 - Acts 17.22-31, John 14.15-21

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Paul is in Athens, and Athens is a religious place. Lots of memorials, religious sites, altars. I haven't been to Athens since I was a teenager, but I remember walking up to the Acropolis, exploring the carvings, being fascinated by it all. I have used this Lockdown Period to do a futurelearn course on Hadrian's Wall, and I'm currently reading a biography of the Emperor Hadrian. I purchased a Penguin edition of Marguerite Yourcenar's book Memoirs of Hadrian, one of those old orange Penguin books. Mine is obviously a second hand copy, and it came with a BOAC Refreshment voucher which the past owner had obviously used as a bookmark! Hadrian was a Roman Emperor, but he fascinated by Greece - the intellectual, spiritual powerhouse of the Mediterranean, of the Empire itself.

My futurelearn course had a section on tombstones and altars on Hadrian's Wall. You might like to have a look at my blog on Flavinus' stone in Hexham Abbey, or the memorial at Elsdon, the altars and stones in the Great North Museum in Newcastle, or the churches at Heavenfield and Chollerton where Roman altars are now inside Christian churches. I've also watched the Mary Beard programmes about Rome - probably still on iplayer - it has been rather nice having more free evenings than normal, and being able to watch what I wanted to see. There is religion entwined into the lives of the people.

On my facebook posts this week I have ended up looking at engineers and inventors. I started with Florence Nightingale on the 200th anniversary of her birth, then got onto the pre-fab hospital Isambard Kingdom Brunel designed for the Crimea, then onto John Brunton the man he sent to build it, onto his father William, and yesterday I found myself looking at the faith of James Watt and Joseph Priestley, Birmingham inventors, men who changed the world, men of faith. Incredible intelligent men and women, people who did amazing things, and people for whom faith was there, deep, embedded, inspiring and enriching their lives. I can imagine all of them in the cultural melting pot that was first century Athens, discussing, debating, challenging, learning.

Paul himself is an intelligent, clever man. In his letters he tells us about his education, he comes over as clever, he doesn't suffer fools gladly - I sometimes think he must have been a difficult person to have as leader of your church. He is there in Athens, and he is trying to make the case for his Christian faith. It isn't very easy. He sees that people are religious, he recognises their faith, and he tries to shape it with the knowledge of Jesus Christ, the faith of Jesus Christ.

“I see you are very religious. I see you have the image of an unknown God. I want to tell you about that unknown God. I want to tell you about Jesus.”

He tells them about a Creator God - and that idea is often at the basis of human belief. I'm also listening to a long series on BBC Sounds “13 minutes to the Moon”, a series of programmes about the Apollo programme. We had that recording from Apollo 8, Christmas Eve 1967, when those three astronauts, brilliant, intelligent men, men quite literally at the edge of human progress - and they looked down on the earth and read to use the first chapter of Genesis: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” And the world listened.

Even in the current chaos, we do believe that “God created the heavens and the earth”. It is harder to believe in a power undergirding, holding, in control, when life is chaos and we're afraid - but we try. I do not believe that God created this virus, it seems far more likely that it has emerged through human misuse of the environment. There is an on-line presentation on Wednesday evening by some academics from Derby University, including some of those who came to our evening in the Fellowship Room earlier in the year, with the title of “Are emerging diseases part of Climate change?” All are welcome to listen in, but you do need to book through this link

<https://www.derby.ac.uk/events/latest-events/are-emerging-diseases-part-of-climate-change/>

God gives mortals life and breath and all things. He sets the boundaries, of life and death - encouraging us to search for him. I love the phrase “perhaps grope for him and find him” - sometimes it does feel as if we are groping for him, especially at the moment. We are groping, and He's not always easy to find - some of those who tell us faith is simple need to be reminded like that. I remembered this poem by the Welsh priest R.S. Thomas

Prayers like gravel
flung at the sky's
window, hoping to attract
the loved one's
attention. But without
visible plaits to let
down for the believer
to climb up,
to what purpose open
that far casement?
I would
have refrained long since
but that peering once

through my locked fingers
I thought that I detected
the movement of a curtain.

Sometimes I sit and say my prayers and God doesn't seem to reply, sometimes everything piles in on top, sometimes we wonder why - but we have detected the movement of a curtain, we have caught glimpses of the God who loves us, sustains us, redeems us - the God we love and worship.

Yesterday I said Evening Prayer at St Matthew's, and it didn't do much for me. The church was empty except for me, and the psalm set, Psalm 78, has quite a lot about the wrath of God - it includes the line "their priests were slain with the sword and there were no widows to make lamentation", which was just what I need! I left church, wondering why I'd bothered, came down the steps, and John Gratton drove past. We stopped and had a socially distanced chat - and I know why I believe, why I am a priest, why I am here.

I had something to put through Clive's door, so I walked the pretty way through the Park - saw a few people I recognised. I decided to come home in a longer circle along Kedleston Road. To be honest, everything looked normal - a small queue outside Sainsbury's, but nothing more frightening than that. Until I got to the front of the University. There were large notices up saying "No filming", filming what, I wondered? Then I realise there is a man in a full hazmat suit on the security barrier, and I realise it's the Covid testing centre. Normality suddenly disappears, and we're back to the Doomsday scenario again. What it must be like to be a hospital patient, surrounded by people wearing this equipment, I hate to think. What it must be like to have to wear this stuff all day, every shift, I cannot imagine. It is worth reminding ourselves that the number of NHS and care staff who have died in the last five weeks is greater than the number of British soldiers who died in the Iraq War. Perhaps just pause and let that sink in.

I know we need to move on, to start re-opening, to get the economy going again - but we can't just wave it all away and pretend normality has been restored. Our teachers are not being a bunch of left wing skivers, whatever some in the media say - they are dedicated men and women who don't want to see their children, or themselves, catching Covid19 because plans are being made to re-open schools when it is still too dangerous to do so. Of course life has an element of risk, we know that, of course children need to be in school, we know that - but we also need to travel slowly, to be careful, to show love and concern.

Paul talks to the Greeks about a need for repentance, he talks about judgement. It's not language I find very easy to cope with - but actually, yes, we need

judgement, we need justice, we need repentance. I would be much more supportive of our leaders if they acknowledge mistakes made. No one expects anyone to get everything right when you're dealing with a pandemic, something as new and frightening as this. But you don't get my support if, rather than say "we know we made mistakes, we know there's a problem, this is what we're doing to support it", you tell me everything is fine, everything was fine, when people who know are saying it isn't. It is a huge job making sure our care homes and their staff have the PPE they need, of course there have been errors, so admit those errors, don't lie and tell me everything is fine. Repentance is OK - we all make mistakes, we are all struggling in the dark - lying is not OK.

I want justice - it was reported in the Telegraph yesterday that the wonderfully name Rico Back, the man in charge of Royal Mail, has left the company. He has been given a £1 million payoff. This is the man who was given a £5.8m payment in July 2017 when his contract as boss of Royal Mail's European parcels business was renegotiated. It was also reported a couple of days ago that there'll have to be a public sector pay freeze as our country faces up to the cost of the Covid crisis. Fine, let's pay someone £7 million (someone who has spent the last few weeks at his house in Switzerland), and tell others (who we've been clapping for) that we're not willing to give them a pay rise. Where's the justice in that?

The passage from John's Gospel reminds me of the need for love - and we have seen an incredible amount of love from wonderful people in this crisis. I hope we can be a world, a country, a church - that we can be individuals, who love. People who have faith, who forgive, who demand justice, and who stand with people in the darkness. God is love, God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. Hang on to that.

Peter Barham
16 May 2020