

Acts 17:22-31

22 Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 23 For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. 24 The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. 26 From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, 27 so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. 28 For "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we too are his offspring." 29 Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. 30 While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a

man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.'

John 14:15-21

Jesus said to the disciples, 15 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. 17 This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. 18 'I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. 19 In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. 20 On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. 21 They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.'

Cleaning out the Closet

Today's readings are all connected quite a lot and If we had read Acts which if you have the mail shot you will find on the reading sheet, you will see it is the famous reading when Paul goes to the centre of Athens and sees all the foreign Gods the Athenians are worshipping.

I want to firstly think about what Paul spoke to them about and how that may help us in our own lives today before moving onto the Gospel reading we have just heard.

The scripture in Acts starts by saying Paul was distressed by what he saw in Athens.

Question – What causes you distress?

Many things in the last few months: Not seeing friends,
Not being able to see or hold your grandchildren,

Not being able to comfort a friend who is sick, Not being able to be at the bedside of someone who is dying or even attend their funeral.

What would you have done to alleviate this distress? I suspect anything – even making a fool of yourself would have been the least concern for you if you could have alleviated yours or someone else's distress, and so we return to the story of Paul.

Paul is distressed at what he saw. Athens was a cosmopolitan city – an educational centre and an especially important place in the Greek world – a little like London. Everything and anything went. Little was questioned and most was accepted as being ok.

Paul wasn't just addressing the 'religious' but the political and economic going on in the city. Unlike today in Paul's time the religion of the city was tied up in everything else to do with life. It was not a separate box like many people today tend to put things into.

He argued with the Philosophers not the way we think of Philosophy these days, but what makes us human, where life begins etc

Paul was wanting to explain that a new world had been born since Jesus had died and rose from the dead. Religion – 'religio' was the official religion, and in Athens there were many Gods people could choose from to worship. When Paul starts to talk about a new God then they would have thought of it as superstition and they would have been extremely concerned.

The Areopagus is a court, and that is where they took Paul as they were concerned as he was talking about something that could hugely effect people's lives and livelihoods as a lot of the economy was tied up with pagan worship.

The court when it was founded was built to try the ultimate cases including the case of murder, in its foundation charter of the court it was stated that there *was no resurrection* – so what Paul is saying is completely against what they believe.

It was a very serious point he was making – not just a nice little conversation.

So, he was in fact possibly having to argue for his life rather than just preaching a gentle sermon.

He uses the altar of the unknown God to open a possibility to them that there may be 1 true God and he goes onto tell them to that the gods they are worshipping don't even exist. Saying the God he serves doesn't live in temples built through human hands, and how this one true God wants a relationship with the people he has created.

In saying this he polarised the opinions of both the Stoic and Epicuran world views which were prolific in the Greek world.

Stoics believe that all the gods are part of a great divine whole and the task of a human is to live in harmony with the gods, the Stoics put gods and the world together;

The Epicureans in contrast thought the gods were miles away and they didn't have to worry about them, not only that but when they died their body which they believed were made up of atoms went to the atmosphere.

Paul was navigating between these 2 group peoples. He was teaching something new and tells the Jewish story about the one and only God who sent Jesus to come and live among them.

He is telling the some of the most famous judges in the most important city in the world this story, at the same time making it clear to these judges that they too will be judged by a God that they don't know.

He confounds them with this message –

He doesn't say that everything is wrong but that they are ignorant and that they need to look for the truth. He is giving them the opportunity to meet with the living God.

I wonder how many times we have considered who God is and considered our own spiritual journey over the last few months?

Have we thought about doing our own spiritual clean out in the same way many seem to have cleaned cupboards or have we just gone on the same as ever. Maybe waiting for a Sunday morning fix when we could see a familiar face to make us feel like everything is ok?

I must confess to only cleaning out a couple of cupboards- they weren't pretty I found things in them from 2017 – There a few cupboards which I will need a torch to see into the corner of. Clearing and cleaning is always hard

work and I often get half- way through it and wish I hadn't started!

Maybe as we have looked deeply at our spiritual life shining the Holy Spirit torch onto those dark areas of our life and world, we may have found things we wish weren't there. Maybe even questioned our faith.

I suspect many of us too have been brought to our knees in prayer over the current crisis.

I guess some will have questioned where God is in the pandemic?

A book by John C Lennox 'Where is God in a coronavirus world' is well worth reading – I feel it gives a much greater perspective on the virus and history of how other pandemics have played out.

I wonder if the recent crisis has shown us that our trust has been in the wrong place. Where our foreign gods have been highlighted?

Maybe that of shopping, money, work, position- even where we spend our leisure times.

As everything has been stripped and nothing is as it was, where have we found our ultimate trust landing?

I think many of the things we do may draw us away from God.

Many things can easily become a huge distraction. Rather than spending time in prayer or doing what God really wants us to do we end up filling our lives with things which if we were to look at with an eternal view would not be how God would want us to be spending our time.

Back to my first question – what makes you distressed?

I will share one of the things that gets me distressed; when people don't take God or his word seriously. When they play with spirituality as if it is a pick and mix sweet shop.

I have had a very interesting spiritual walk over my lifetime and have learnt a lot about how things are not always the way they seem.

There are many practices that Christians get involved in which if they were to look into the roots they wouldn't touch.

If we genuinely believe in a spiritual realm then we must look at the roots of the things we get involved in that includes clubs which may look like a good 'network' opportunity.

If we can be distracted and have blinkers on from God, then we can guarantee the enemy will do his best to lead us down the wrong avenue too.

I think this crisis will have made many question their belief and who and what they really are putting their trust in. Many foreign gods and idols will have been revealed.

The question is are we willing to clean our spiritual closet out and get real with the one true God who loves us? or will we go back to playing religion wherever our 'temple' may be when things return to normal.

I pray to God this is not the case. We need more of God in our lives than ever before.

God is not a slot machine who wants us to play spiritual games and jump through hoops in order that he will pay out his goodies. A similar way to the Athenians who tried to appease their gods.

He is a heavenly father who wants a deep committed relationship with us.

Our Gospel reading tells us how we can clean out our spiritual closet:

'If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him.

This is the only way we can clean out our spiritual closet and that is by asking the Holy Spirit to come and live

within us and reveal to us the truth of who we are and who God is.

As things do return to normal, we need to be aware of what we have learnt about ourselves and God in this time.

Nothing of this earth will go with us apart from our trust in Jesus, that trust which offers us eternal life.

That alone takes us into our next chapter where we can be reassured that the God who loves us and desires us more than we can imagine wants to be able to say

“Well done Good and faithful servant”

Well done on not being drawn into the ways of the world for standing firm against all opposition that would try and distract.

Well done on following me through the good times and the bad.

Well done on taking me seriously and allowing me to shine my light onto those areas of our lives which need cleaning out.