

Sunday 17 May 2020: 6th Sunday of Easter

Readings: Acts 17:22-31, 1 Peter 3:8-11 & John 14:15-21

By: The Rev'd Nic Denny-Dimitriou, Coromandel Valley Parish, Director of Formation

Last Sunday's Gospel reading included the claim by Jesus to be "the way, the truth, and the life". Whilst it says more about Jesus than it does about our questions on what to make of other religions, this week's readings give us some material especially on that subject.

The passage that deals with it directly is the one we heard from the Acts of the Apostles. Paul is in Athens, sometime before Christianity became the dominant religion there. 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 religious people. As if to confirm that impression, he is invited to meet with the Areopagus, a Council of respected and distinguished thinkers in the city, to explain his faith to them.

His speech to the Areopagus would probably have received the approval of the Apostle Peter, because in the extract from his letter in the NT reading, Peter said that when we are given the opportunity to speak about our faith, we should do so readily and with gentleness and respect. Gentleness may not be the word that immediately comes to mind when you think of the Apostle Paul, but it would be hard to fault him on this occasion.

Paul begins by affirming the Athenians for their keen interest in religion. He quotes approvingly from their respected poets. Instead of telling them that their religions are 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 preach is not something strange and new, but rather it is the missing knowledge of a faith that is already within their experience.

That raises the question: Is this slick marketing by Paul, or is he speaking with integrity about some deep truths concerning the nature of God?

The advertising industry would have been proud of the angle he took, but it also seems 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 line, Paul is saying that, regardless of what they might or might not believe, no one is entirely cut off from God or removed from the influence of God. To live, to move, to be; everything 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. 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 it seems that Paul is recognising that the religious efforts of people of other faiths are genuine attempts to reach out to God. It also seems that he is saying that God does not refuse their advances or insist that they get their teaching absolutely correct before having anything to do with them. Paul goes so far as to say that God has even tolerated idolatry among people who knew of no alternative. 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 seems to tie up with the words of Jesus in the gospel reading when he made the exclusive-sounding statement that the world cannot receive the Holy Spirit because it neither sees nor knows the Spirit, but that the disciples can receive the Spirit and in fact do receive it.

When Christ is made known, it demands a choice, rather than simply allowing people to add a bit of Christian faith to their lives yet leave everything else unchanged. The demands of Christian discipleship will not be domesticated to fit "the world". There comes a point when you are required to choose one way or the other.

So in Paul's speech we find what looks like a mix; there is both 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? If you hoped that I'd offer an opinion on whether people can be saved through other religions, I'm going to disappoint you: I don't think this passage offers an answer to that question (a deep and complex issue too).

But it does offer a criticism of the way some Christians have treated people of other faiths, and it challenges us if we think that we have a monopoly on knowledge and experience of God.

Paul's speech is clearly stating that there are people who do not know anything about Christ, but who are reaching out for God and responding to God. Paul clearly implies that we cannot actually "take" Christ to them, to use popular Christian terminology, because in fact Christ is already among them, since... **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 became human among us, who in Jesus was embodied in a place where he may not have been 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 God 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.

For us it begins here, encountering the risen Christ in the word spoken and the bread broken, and in doing these things (even if in limited ways in this Coronavirus-time), we recognise him in all places. Henri Nouwen said that "when we have met our Lord in the silent intimacy of our prayer, then we will also meet him in the market and in the town square. But when we have not met him in the centre of our own hearts, we cannot expect to meet him in the busyness of our daily lives." So as we encounter Jesus here, let us continue to acknowledge and celebrate Jesus wherever and in whomever we encounter him, and to offer ourselves more fully and consciously into the hands of **God, in whom we live and move and have our being.**

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### **General Prayer of Thanksgiving** *[Based on the Scripture Readings]*

We give you all thanks and praise, O God, in gratitude for the constant love you have pledged to us.

The world and everything in it was made by you. Life and breath are your gifts to all mortal things, and in you we live and move and have our being. Everywhere and always you have been within our reach and have inspired us to search for you.

In Jesus the Christ, you have shown yourself to us, the unknowable, revealed in the known. He was rejected and put to death in the flesh, but you raised him from the dead and gave him life in the Spirit. Through his resurrection, you have raised us, and now your blessing abides with us and your Spirit assures us of your coming justice.

Therefore, with our hearts lifted high, we offer you thanks and praise at all times through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

*(Adapted from a prayer written by Nathan Nettleton)*