

Before Coronavirus, every year Alison & I and other friends from Coleraine would go on a long weekend break to a European city. I remember one of our most recent trips to Dubrovnik in Croatia. And on the first day arriving, like most tourists you take a dander round the city to get your bearings. The old city which is walled is beautiful and looks relatively clean and new. All the roofs are new tiles of the same colour. It truly is a beautiful city. As we walked on that first day I can remember spying many holes walls, and places where repairs had obviously been done to the streets. And this was because of the massive artillery attack that took place on the city in 1991 with the breakup of the former Yugoslavian republic and the formation of Croatia and Slovenia. We took some time to go up onto the adjacent mountain ridge overlooking the city and seeing where the artillery strikes were coming from. But what a change today, very much a transformed city after a dreadful siege.

We do take those moments on holiday when we arrive in a new place to peruse and wander for a while. And I'm guessing as we pick up again our readings in Acts, that Paul is doing that very thing in Athens as he waits for Silas and Timothy to arrive.

Our reading opens with him observing what is all around him, and it says he is greatly distressed with what he sees – a city full of idols.

Have you ever observed a situation around you, and you were deeply distressed by it? It might be something you have seen on the news. But these things for me generally compel me to do something about it.

As a Church when we see need, we do something about it – we don't just sit back. Now, if we are stirred to support the need but that's it, then all we are is another caring community organisation.

We must go *beyond* just meeting a physical need and to reach the hearts of people with the Gospel message. We are Gospel carriers, all of us.

Paul here was grieved by what he saw. But he didn't just keep his concerns to himself. He reasoned it says in the Synagogue with Jews and God fearing Greeks. But, he also goes into the marketplace everyday to have conversations. For us what does this mean? Well it means I'm not just going to talk about Jesus in church; I'm going to talk about Jesus in the marketplace, at work, in the shop down the street. Wherever it may be, it is not just restricted to while I'm at church or in a small group. If we claim to be followers of Jesus, and I know many of you say you are, then we must be committed to taking the Gospel outside these walls and share it.

In this year to come I am going to be thinking a lot about our value of Reaching out, but from the perspective of reaching out with the Gospel. It's down to you and me, every single day, being committed to being faithful to boldly and courageously speak the name of Jesus, not just in church, but in your home, in your neighborhood, at your office, wherever it may be having the courage to make Jesus known.

Remember what 1 Peter 3:15 says, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect". What will that look like for you this week?

And Paul applies this gentleness with the Athenians because he understands that for many, the Gospel may seem strange. Our reading talks about the Epicureans and the Stoics. The Epicureans were concerned with pursuing happiness and contentment. They worshipped many different things and were committed to keeping their religion separate from daily life. Is that not a familiar categorisation for many today. Don't mix faith with politics they say. All of this is totally unbiblical. God is Lord of all. We can't separate our faith from life. He *is* life.

The Stoics, on the other hand, sought to live in harmony and peace. They believed that God is one with the Universe. They would say that they could find God in the trees and in every day nature. There's nothing wrong with that when you consider that God created everything but God is a distinct person in himself. He is not simply nature. We see this style of belief in many new age movements. Again none of these are biblical. And so these folks can't except the strange message Paul is giving, labelling him as a babbler.

We've got to be ready for rejection, and even the great Paul received that, but it didn't hamper him from continuing to discuss matters with those who wanted to hear him. I was in a prayer gathering the other evening in our church in which someone prayed, "Lord we have a good news to proclaim. Why would we ever want to hold on to it if it's good news to share". And that is so right. We've got to expect rejection like that of the Epicurians but we continue to share it, no matter what.

As John Piper said, it's Breaking news that God came to earth in the form of His Son, Jesus. He lived. He died. He rose again, so that we can be in right relationship and in good standing with the Creator of the world. Because of that, should not be more willing to live with rejection than live with the regret of doing nothing.

So let's now look at verses 22 to 28.

Have you ever wondered where the Areopagus is. It's a prominent rock located northwest of the Acropolis in Athens. The Romans referred to the rocky hill as "Mars Hill", after Mars, the Roman version of the Greek God of War. In ancient times, this was the place where they would come and have great debates, or significant trials would take place here. In fact, even Socrates was tried and condemned here for showing a lack of reverence. This would have been like our Supreme Court in London. where people would come to discuss and debate, try something, and give a definitive answer on what is right, what is wrong, and what is true. So, I think it's significant to note that Paul now is invited to this place.

Paul's approach is something we can all learn from. He begins with trying to find a place where they can all agree, a place of common ground. And so he remarks that they are very religious. He's going to take their religious attitude toward embracing many gods as an opportunity for him to teach that there really is only one true God.

For many of us as Christians witnessing to people around us, we have got to find the common ground. There was no point in Paul talking about the scriptures, or the Torah – the Law, because for his audience they wouldn't have a clue what he was talking about. So where is the common ground from which you can have a conversation with someone else? Don't just assume that people today know the

spiritual churchy language that you use. Allow God by his Spirit to direct you to where the common ground is for a conversation with another person.

The conversation that Paul had didn't start by saying, "I was walking down this road. I was going to go kill some people because they were Christians. This big, shining light hit me, and I had this encounter with Jesus, and it changed my life forever." He didn't even say that.

He pointed them straight to God Himself. He just talked about God. He had seen a sign that said "To an unknown God", and therefore he knew he could start there. In verse 24, he says "God does not live in temples built by human hands". And then he goes on to say "he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else." He knew he could talk about a God who wanted to be known.

You see when we meet others and we don't know what to say we might think we are having to go into a battle or a debate, to justify our values and beliefs. But it's not a matter of winning an argument. It's not about convincing someone through logic and reason. We just need to point people to God, the Creator and sustainer of life, the giver and the breath of everything in creation and let people see Him for who He is. And we do this by looking at the life of Jesus. We act as an instrument of the Holy Spirit and we allow the Holy Spirit to do what only he can do.

Paul is using common ground to essentially help them realise the hope that comes from the living God and nothing else, not some statue made of stone or some objects or symbols that organisations may use to point people to a higher force. He like us should want people to latch onto the hope only found in Jesus Christ, that they will see that he is the anchor that will sustain them in life, not because they are strong, but because **He** is strong, and He can hold them up. What an important message to proclaim in these tough days for our country.

But when God's Word is presented, it demands a response. So when Paul gets to verse 29, it's like, "I've been telling you about Jesus. I've been pointing you to the Gospel. I've been talking about Jesus and His resurrection. This is who God is, and now it's time for you to do something about it."

For Christmas Alison and the boys bought me a new watch, and it has fitness settings on it. One in particular is quite funny. It will buzz on my arm and display the message 'MOVE'. It's trying to get me to not sit in a seat for too long. There is a need to be active and fit. And Paul in this last section of our reading is doing the same thing. It requires a response one way or the other.

He's cutting right to the heart of the Stoics who say that, "Well, God is just one with nature, and I can connect with Him that way." He's cutting right to the heart of the Epicureans, who say, "Well you know, what I do every day doesn't matter. I can go to church and have some God-conversation, and that ticks the box".

No, God is a personal God who is with you all the time, walking with you, guiding you, knowing you. Hebrews 11:6 says that 'without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly **seek** him'. This faith that we want people to have must

be relational and it must be active. It's not a faith at all if you think it's marked by an attendance each Sunday or a popping of money into an envelope. Trust me that is not faith. That's called membership.

And so not leaving it there, Paul in verse 30 calls people to repent. I know I repeat myself on this one all the time, but it's that important. Repentance is this idea that I'm going one direction, and I see my need to change. I see my need to turn from my old ways. I see that I need to turn from these false idols and these other priorities in my life and towards this one, true God. I see my need to change and repent. It's like I mentioned last week about the Scottish pastor – if there are things in life that take a priority, if the Bible is not your main book you read, if worship is not a part of your daily routine, if God is not receiving the first fruits of your income, if things like this become a greater priority than seeking God then be very aware – they are your idols.

And Paul marks this occasion as he stands on Mars Hill in Athens to all these learned philosophers that there is a time coming when Jesus will return. Ironically Mars Hill would have been a place where judgments would have been made over what was considered true, and now Paul uses it as a place to confront them about the judgment that would come through Jesus. And yes some sneered but others wanted to know more. But that's as far as Paul takes it. It says in a very short verse, verse 33 'At that, Paul left the Council'.

When we tell others about the good news of the Gospel, we must decide when our job is done. As I said before it is not our job to do the work of the Holy Spirit. And yet I don't believe however that Paul walked away from the Council and did nothing. I suspect his mind was placed before God in prayer all those that he had talked to, remembering names, remembering faces, but he laid it before God. And that is what we need to do. Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians Chapter 3 these words which show the place that we have as co-workers in God's Service, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. ⁷ So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. ⁸ The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labour. ⁹ For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building".

Everyone of us today needs to examine whether in our own context, whether in work, or at home with our family, or whatever it is, whether we cherish the message of the Gospel enough that we want to share it. If we don't want to then can I ask you, have you received the message of the Gospel at all? In this year ahead we are going to be thinking much more about the Gospel that we proclaim, and that it truly is good news to all. Pray that God will give you opportunity to share it in this week ahead, and if you are listening but can't declare it for yourself, then seek God today who created you, and wants a relationship with you – a real living every day relationship which will be your anchor for everything.

Take a moment at the end of our time together, a bit like my trip to Dubrovnik, to find your bearings. What's your context today where God wants you to share his Good News? Now do something about it.