

Easter 6 2011
Acts 17:22-31 “Paul Preaches in Athens”

In today’s first lesson we find St. Paul on his 2nd missionary journey. He has been all over the Mediterranean world starting churches. He’s been quite successful up to this point. Now he finds himself in Athens, the center of the intellectual universe in the first century. There were schools for thinkers interested in Plato and Aristotle, Stoicism and Epicureanism. Athens was the cradle of western classical civilization. Yet Paul was not impressed. He looked around at all the temples and saw a “city full of idols”.

The Athenians had gods for everything.

Aphrodite	Goddess of love
Apollo	God of light, medicine, poetry
Ares	God of war
Artemis	Goddess of hunting and childbirth
Athena	Goddess of wisdom (patron God of Athens)
Dionysus	God of wine, fertility and wild behavior
Eros	God of love
Hermes	Messenger of the gods
Hypnos	God of sleep
Poseidon	God of the sea
Zeus	Ruler of the gods -- to list just a few.

So, Paul, being the greatest Christian missionary of his time, immediately went to work. “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 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.’”

But when Paul began to proclaim Jesus as the “unknown God” and talk about the resurrection the crowd started to thin out. The people of Athens had their own ideas about how the gods worked, how the world was ordered and the meaning of life. They had their own philosophy about life - and salvation of the world through the death and resurrection of a Jewish Messiah wasn’t part of it. And so, “Some mocked Paul when they heard of the resurrection of the dead....”

Those who believed were few in number, Dionysius and a woman named Damaris and a few others. But most of the crowds left and the church at Athens remained small. There is no epistle of Paul to the church at Athens in the Bible. Paul went next to the town of Corinth, not far from Athens. His approach to preaching there changed radically. Hear it in his own words as he describes his style of proclamation from his first letter to the Corinthians (I Cor. 2:1-5) “And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ² For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”

Christianity proclaims the good news of the resurrection to the world. There are those who believe and there are those who reject the resurrection as wishful thinking, or as myth or legend. The Athenians rejected it.

The Greeks had many gods. Some commentators say that in our time we have gone just the opposite way... we are nihilistic. That is we believe in no god.

If St. Paul were to visit us today what would he say? What do we worship?

We may not have temples to many gods but we do have many false gods and idols. Let me name just a few that come to mind.

The False god of "Meism"

"Meism" - We live in a generation of the self first. The religion of "self-first" values independence, autonomy, power and control. It considers all issues of life on how they affect "me". To use a medical image, "meism" is the cancer of a healthy self image. It is self gone wild. Everything in life revolves around "Me"

‘Meism' demands instant rewards. "Meism" is like fire, the more you feed it the hungrier it gets and the more powerful it grows. The appetite of the self is insatiable.

There is a story (it may also have begun as a Greek legend) about a beautiful girl who went to the well everyday to gaze into the water at her beautiful image. She became more and more entranced by her beauty and went back to the well more and more frequently. One day, as she stared at herself in the well she became so transfixed that she fell into the well and drowned. The point of the story is that the self is a deep well, and a dangerous one. Yet there are many people who worship the god of self.

The False god of "Shallow religion"

"Shallow religion" is another false god in our time. Shallow religion is first and foremost convenience oriented. What gives me the greatest comfort at the least cost. Shallow religion is full of cheap grace where God is reduced to a sugar daddy. We use religion when we need it. God becomes a giant aspirin. I talked to a woman who said that "God came into the world to relieve our pain." As this woman talked it became clear that to her God was a giant aspirin...take one now and then as needed for the pains of life. That may be cozy philosophy, but it is poor, anemic Xianity that will do little to solve the big questions of life and give substance and meaning to our existence. The religion of convenience lacks depth and substance. There is no room for the joy found in serving others, no joy born out of sacrifice. If the religion of self is dangerously deep, the religion of convenience is dangerously shallow. Yet many worship at the temple of shallow, convenient religion.

The False god of "Expedience"

"Expedience" is another false god in our time. The religion of expedience holds no values. If the well of the self is dangerously deep, and the religion of convenience dangerously shallow, then the religion of expedience is perfectly flat and smooth...like a sheet of glass. All things are equally valueless if your only value is expedience. The religion of expedience approves whatever is in vogue at the time. It is trendy religion that lacks rootedness, history, substance, and stability. In its most benign form it understands "Kindness" as the highest virtue. But in its most malignant form it tolerates every kind of evil. For expedience lacks backbone. In the temple of expedience you can believe whatever you want. A person can be

tolerant of falsehood and evil. Many people in our time worship at the temple of "expedience".

The False god of Pleasure and Insatiable Appetite

There are other false gods in our time as well. The god of pleasure and insatiable appetite. Briefly, the danger of this false god is that when a person searches for pleasure you must up the ante constantly looking for more pleasurable experiences. It is a constant search for the "latest thrill". The problem is that once you have been to the heights the appetite is not satisfied. And if the false god of pleasure is to be satisfied there is only one place left to search for pleasure...and that is in the opposite direction. This is the danger of hedonism. It has a dark underside that draws people into the base and crude and vile and bestial and eventually the demonic.

The False god of Accumulation

There is the false god of accumulation...rake it all in - grasp and hold more of everything.

The False god of Technology

There is the false god of technology. People who worship technology believe it will save the world. This gives us an elevated understanding of human capacity for good and a naivety about the human capacity for evil. Technology is viewed as valueless or amoral. Persons who worship technology deny human responsibility to make moral judgments.

It is easy to cook up a theology as personal and idiosyncratic as ones own appetite. Everyone is an expert on God. The danger of this is that we then define God in our own image. We reduce Xianity to what WE believe to be true without any outside corrective or normative documentation.

Paul proclaimed to the Athenians the "unknown God". God remains hidden until He reveals himself in Jesus.

We grope around in the dark looking for God if we look only to our own understanding and desires for God. For God will not be found in temples made of human philosophy. God is found only where he has chosen to reveal himself to us -- in Jesus of Nazareth who lived in a backwards country, who preached and did miracles and gathered a few followers before he was killed by the Romans. This Jesus, had he stayed dead, would have been long forgotten. But God raised Jesus from the dead. And God intends to raise you too. And because Jesus died for you your sins are forgiven. You won't find this kind of talk in the temples of our world that exalt human potential and human accomplishment and personal fulfillment. You will find this liberating gospel only in temples raised to glorify Jesus the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

The intellectual elite of ancient Greece didn't believe, except for a few people, Dionysius and Damaris and a few others. But from those few who did believe, the message of Jesus spread and spread through the power of the Holy Spirit until it reached Rome and the rest of the world. And now it has come to you here. And you come to church each Sunday because you also believe and you want to hear the good news again.

You believe that in Jesus there is hope.

You believe that in Jesus there is life now and the promise of life after death.

You believe and you trust in God for your future.

And you come each Sunday to hear once again, "your sins are forgiven in Jesus". You come to hear it because you know it is the truth that gives you eternal life. Thanks be to God. Amen.