Easter 6A – 17 March 2020 – Acts 17:22-31 – WebEx

So, last week the zealous Pharisee Saul was watching as Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was stoned to death by members of the Sanhedrin for the blasphemy of – in their understanding – denying the strict monotheism of Judaism by suggesting Jesus, in addition to Yahweh, was Divine.

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Between that reading and today’s, Acts relates a lot of stuff important to the evolution of the church from a small sect of Jerusalem Judaism to a separate religion.

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But for our purposes this evening, the most significant of these things is Saul’s conversion as he was on the way to Damascus to arrest members of this sect referred to as “The Way.”

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Remember that “Saul” is the Hebrew form of “Paul,” and Luke moves from one name to the other as our man himself moves from his position as a staunch defender of orthodox Judaism to being the premier apostle to the Gentiles, and, arguably, the founder of Christianity as it has come to us today.

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Establishing a new religion is not what Paul had in mind, of course – Paul fully expected Jesus to return during his own lifetime, and much of his writing reveals this sense of urgency and his belief that humanity’s remaining time on earth was short.

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But Jesus did *not* return according to Paul’s timeline, and a new religion *is* what arose from Paul’s ministry.

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Now what Luke, in Acts, has to say about Paul’s background and education is different than what Paul himself says in his Letters to the various churches he established.

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But what is clear across the board is that he was well educated, not only in the Jewish law, but in rhetoric and the writings of the classical Greek poets and philosophers.

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And it is through the latter that he eventually hooks into his Athenian audience in the Areopagus, as we see in our text for this week.

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Paul was *in* Athens because he had basically been run out of every other town in which he had been preaching.

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Here in this city – a shadow of its former glorious self, but still the seat of great learning – he had been proclaiming the gospel both in the synagogues and in the marketplaces.

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Luke is silent on what sort of a reaction his words provoked in the synagogue, but the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who encountered him in the public places were mostly – unimpressed.

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And these were the people who took him to the Areopagus.

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If you had the opportunity to read this week’s Ponder and Skyrocket, you will recall that the Areopagus was both a place – a large rocky outcrop – and a council of elders which held various legal powers.

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It is unclear from Acts whether Paul was simply taken to the *place*, as an obvious location to speak to an interested audience, or to the *council*, to defend himself against the ideas he was proclaiming.

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The latter would have been no small thing – remember that Socrates, long before, had been sentenced to death after being convicted of corrupting the youth of Athens and “introducing strange gods.”

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Now, I confess that in previous readings of this text, I had never paid too much attention to the fact that Paul is not really being particularly “Paul-like” in his discourse to the members of the council and bystanders gathered to hear him.

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He is not brash and bold and in-your-face.

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He is, rather, a model of what we could call “cross-worldview evangelism” – speaking the Word to people with a culture, environment, and society quite different from his own.

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Notice that no point here does he directly refer to Hebrew scripture.

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He does not recite the history of Israel.

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He does not *name* the deity of which he speaks, nor any of the Jewish figures to whom he alludes – humanity is simply said to have descended “from one,” and is judged “by the man whom God has appointed.”

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On the other side, even though Luke tells us Paul was extremely distressed by all the idols he saw in the city, he *starts* his address by letting his audience know he has paid careful attention to *their* religious culture, then *complimenting* them on their evident faith.

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A misguided and misplaced faith, perhaps, but faith he allows himself to suggest is honest and sincere nonetheless.

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He then establishes his intellectual credentials – crucial bonaf**Ī**des in *this* particular group – not by holding his own Jewish prophets and poets up as the only ones of value, but by quoting revered *Greek* texts.

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For example, the phrase “For in him we live, and move, and have our being” is actually a line from Ep.i.mén.i.des’ poem Cré.ti.ca.

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And it’s not just the quote itself that would have impressed his audience, it is the philosophical understanding behind it.

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In Paul’s context, the line might better be translated “For in him we live, and are moved, and are.”

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Heard this way, the reference deals with three points of philosophical understanding.

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“We live” points to our animal life, our essential “creature-liness.”

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“and are moved” does not refer to physical movement, but rather the deployment of our emotional nature – the word in Greek was used by ethical writers to refer to “passions” – fear, love, hate, and the like.

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“and are” invokes that which constitutes our true essential being, our intellect and will.

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Paul then reminds his listeners that two of their ancient poets – Ar.**ā**.tus and Cle.án.thes – attested, although speaking of Zeus, that “we are also his offspring.”

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And as the Stoics, at least, to whom Paul was speaking, believed Zeus was “a power without person” – a life force, not a physical being – he could be confident that they would understand the principle of a god who “does not live in shrines made by man.”

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It is only at the very end of his address that Paul sticks these Athenians with his punch-line about the resurrection of the dead.

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The reaction of his audience to *that* is mixed.

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Some sneered at him. But others said they wanted to hear more. And a few “became followers and believed;” really, not a bad result for anyone proclaiming the Gospel.

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Well, this is all well and good, perhaps, but what is supposed to be our take-away? Are we all supposed to run out and memorize lengthy passages from classical Greek literature?

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No. At least, not necessarily. But we *could*, if we thought we were going to be trying to spread the Good News amongst a bunch of classical Greeks.

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And *that* is really the point.

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You cannot bear witness to the gospel if you cannot find a way to help your audience make sense of it according to what they know, in the midst of their own culture and context, using reference points they recognize.

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To preach the Christian message to a group of people unfamiliar with it, it helps to have spent some time walking around their town – at least metaphorically – making mental notes, until you find the statue they have dedicated to their unknown god.

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And then you can begin sharing the Good News from a place of commonality – poetry, yes, or art, or music, or natural theology, or shared human experience.

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To proclaim the Gospel, you do not need to walk around with a Bible in your hand, reciting big chunks of scripture from memory, ready to lavish a recitation of our entire salvation history on anyone who walks past.

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In fact, doing so probably makes it even less likely that you will get a hearing from the people who need to hear it most.

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That Paul spoke to the people of Athens using language, images, and examples from the Stoic philosophers does not mean he was a Stoic philosopher.

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It means he was respectful enough of them as human beings made in God’s image to meet them where they were.

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It means he chose to hold up what was good rather than simply obsess about what he found distasteful.

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It means he was willing to acknowledge what truth, faith, wisdom, and insight they already possessed and invite them through *that* door into a deeper, richer, more live-giving place – the knowledge and love of Christ.

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We can do that too.

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None of us can connect with everybody. But we all can connect with *somebody*, through a point of shared interest, if we are willing to give it a shot.

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And our Easter imperative – yes, it is *still* Eastertide – is, in fact, to give it a shot.

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When you get to your punch-line about Jesus crucified, resurrected, and ascended, some will mock you. Others might be intrigued. A few might become followers and believe.

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But even the few can’t follow you if you don’t start where they are. So meet them there, no matter how “secular” a place it is. Because God is there too, waiting to show you *all* the way forward. Amen.