

Study 7 13/3/14

Resurrection Amongst Sceptics

Acts 17:22-32

The setting

Gospel proclamation now moves into Europe. The Asian churches have been strengthened and increase in number daily as this section of *Acts* closes (16:5). Then the Spirit forbids Paul to speak the word in Asia (South) or Bithinia (North) and he must keep travelling West and arrives at Troas where he is given a vision about a Macedonian asking for help (16:6-10). Again, God himself leads the mission.

Churches are established in Phillipi, Thessalonica and Berea (16:11—17:15). Hounded out by Jews again, Paul arrives, alone, in Athens. This is the acknowledged intellectual capital of Greece but he does not seem to have had any particular goal here. Rather, he is provoked by idolatry, so reasons with Jews and God fearers in the synagogue (presumably the same message as in other towns), but now also with Greeks in the market place, and his topic, according to them, is 'Jesus and the resurrection' (v. 18). As in other places, the victory of Jesus over death, and his reign over this sinful world, is his core business.

'It is wrong to think of St. Paul's sermon at Athens as a departure from his usual approach. It is almost exactly this [as in 1 Thes. 1:9-10] (John Foster, *After the Apostles*, p. 47n).

The Athenian idol worshipping audience may think "Jesus" (*Iesous*—like *iasis* = healing) and 'Resurrection' (*Anastasis* suggesting renewal) are two more gods. Paul is summoned to the Aeropogus, a prestigious court for what may be a preliminary hearing as to whether this speaker should be allowed to continue. If he says anything that challenges their existing gods, he may be examined further, and be in trouble.

Luke describes the Athenians as spending their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new (agreeing with Thucydides), perhaps implying that they were not interested in believing but in debating. In our own so-called pluralistic and sceptical times, we may well look to see what Paul has in his heart and mind as he speaks to them.

The speech

'You are very religious' Paul begins. The word can mean superstitious but is ambiguous and would not offend his hearers. They don't want to miss any god so have provided an altar for one that is unknown. Paul has begun with core business for him: what or whom do people worship? On the two occasions when an audience is other than Jewish or God-fearers (here and in 14:15-17), his point of contact has to do with worship.

Paul would know the beliefs of Epicureans and Stoics but builds nothing on this. He can quote Greek poets but speaks from his Scriptures. He quoted these to show Jews that Jesus is the Christ, and alludes to them now to show Gentiles that they should not worship idols (as in Isa. 44:9-20). What God has revealed to Israel remains revelation even though fulfilled by Christ. It is truth for all nations. Paul says, 'I can tell you what you are ignorant of!'

God is Creator, he begins. He could have many passages in mind (e.g. Gen. 11:1; Exod. 20:11; Psa. 74:17; Isa. 42:5; 45:7) but simply makes his affirmation. God is Lord in heaven (over the gods) and earth. He is not located in temples (1 Kin. 8:27). He doesn't need us to serve him (Psa. 50:7-15), but rather, is giving (present participle) us life itself (1 Chron. 29:14) and everything to sustain it (Isa. 42:5). Some of his points may have the agreement of part of his audience and other points their disagreement, but that was not his concern.

Paul continues: God has made us from one (man, nature or Father), every 'nation (*ethnos*) of mankind (*anthropos*)' annulling the idea that some nations have a different origin or are more favoured than others (the Athenians believe they are made from *their* soil and are unique).

Our times and boundaries (either history and geography or our seasons and space) are all appointed to us (Deut. 32:8) with the specific intention that we should know him. There is no room for fatalism. He acts so that his creatures will seek him out (as Psa. 14:2; Prov. 8:17; Isa. 55:6; 65:1; Jer. 29:13). Plato used the idea of 'feeling after' for vague guesses at truth, but Paul presents a Father who is seeking his children, so our finding is for someone ready to be found! Paul knows God will provide palpable assurance of his presence (Rom. 1:20; 1 John 1:1). This God is not far from each of us (cf. the Stoics who believe he is identical with us or impersonal) but is present to us (Psa. 145:18; Jer. 23:23-24).

Paul quotes Epimenides, 'In him we live and move and have our being', but he puts his own thought into this: humans are not a spark of the divine, as the philosopher thought, but are made in the image of God ('image' and 'likeness' are familial terms—Gen. 1:26; 5:3). He is not appealing to a natural theology so much as using the question of their cultural fathers to point them to what God is now revealing. He also quotes the Cilician Aratus (c. 315BC) poem *Phaenomena*, 'For we also are his children'. Cleanthes (c. 330-221BC) says something similar. Paul shows that the message of Jesus is the truth for which their poets quested.

Geoffrey Bingham commented, 'There is no need to empathise with another world view and so get drawn more and more into that.'

God reveals himself in his creation, as Paul also taught the people of Lystra (14:15-17), and puts eternity into our hearts (Eccles. 3:11) so that we *ought* to seek, but not so we *can* find the truth of ourselves. There is much regarding God's ways with his creation that we do not know, but what we do know is that no one comes to the Father without Christ (John 14:6) and without the Father drawing them to him (John 6:44). We also know that God has and is revealing sufficient to leave everyone without excuse for not seeking him (Rom. 1:19-21).

Paul returns to the matter of worship: the representations of God or gods that litter the city cannot portray the true God (Psa. 115:4-8; Isa. 37:19; 40:18-19; 46:5-7). He calls these Greeks to share Israel's monotheism—'We should not think...'

Paul has begun with Christ and the resurrection. He has questioned their worship of what cannot be God. He has told them what Israel knows and returned to the very specific visitation of God in Jesus Christ. Their, and our past history is summed up as 'ignorance' (cf. 1 Pet. 1:18), an ignorance that God is willing to overlook (as in 14:16) because the sending of his Son is a call to repentance (as it was for Israel)—to change their minds about worship.

Paul presses them to think about this (we remember that they are apt to debate and not to decide) by reference to the coming again of Jesus as Judge (cf. Psa. 96:13; Dan. 7:13). The day is fixed and the Judge is identified as Jesus. No one can avoid death or miss its significance. We won't, and we don't deserve to live forever. We are assured that this man Jesus will be our judge by the fact that he has been raised from the dead. No one has any excuse for not accepting God's gift (Acts 14:16; Rom. 3:25) because God has declared that this man is his Son (Rom. 1:4).

Our own age scoffs at judgement and resurrection and of any 'Christ' who is resurrected or judges, but it remains that all must deal with sin and death, and the only way forward is to hear the gracious message of the God who raises his Son to announce forgiveness. If we reject this their remains a fearful prospect. Mathematician John Lennox debated with atheist Richard Dawkins some years ago and when the debate came near to its close, without preamble, spoke of the resurrection of Christ. Dawkins scoffed, as did the Athenians. Resurrection is not a logical or expected or acceptable sequel to any human inquiry. It is God's unexpected, undeserved and wonderful intervention into our otherwise sad performance, and it must be announced, not because it is acceptable but because it is true.