

Hespeler, 17 May, 2020 © Scott McAndless

Acts 17:22-31, Psalm 66:8-20, 1 Peter 3:13-22, John 14:15-21

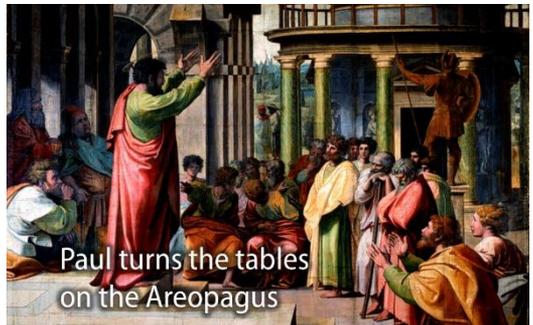
When the Apostle Paul first arrived in the city of Athens, according to the book of Acts, he was really just kind of killing time. He was waiting for some of his friends to catch up with him and, until they got there, he did what you do in a place like Athens. He started behaving like a tourist. And there was a lot to visit. The city had once been the centre of a great empire. Upon its Acropolis were some of the most celebrated buildings and temples in the entire world. And that was just the beginning; it was a city of temples. There were also theatres that were not only places where some of the greatest plays of all times had first been staged² but that were the stages upon which the thespian art itself was invented.

And then there was agora, the legendary marketplace in the city to the north of the Acropolis. There, the very idea of democracy, the rule of the people by the people, had been born. And there, among the stalls, great thinkers like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle had walked and talked and argued.

But here was the thing, when Paul arrived in the city, all of that was ancient history. It had been about four hundred years since Athens had been the centre of anything. But here is a tip for you, you'd better not tell the Athenians that. As far as the Athenians were concerned, they were still the greatest people on the face of the earth and they judged everyone else accordingly.

And so, when the Apostle Paul had finished visiting all of the tourist sites in Athens and taken all his snapshots and sent his postcards (or whatever tourists did back then), he started talking to people in the legendary Athenian agora, talking about their gods and ideas in ways that seemed to challenge the notion that they knew everything. The Athenians they were not very impressed. They called him, according to the Book of Acts, a babbler. At least that is how it is translated in the NRSV Bible. What they literally called him was a scavenger, a seed-picker and a gossiper. They hauled him off to court to be judged.

Now, the court they took him to was called the Areopagus and the Areopagus has once been a real happening place. Oh yes, five hundred years ago, the men of the Areopagus had ruled Athens as elder statesmen. But the Areopagus was no longer the institution it had once been. It was still a court – sort of – a court where they discussed violations of religious protocol. Yeah, I know, that



doesn't sound too powerful, and it wasn't. But I am sure that some of those areopagites thought that their inquest there was actually really important. They were there to judge this babbler and seed picker and they looked down their noses at him and waited for him to embarrass himself. It is an extraordinary moment as the dying embers of what had once been the greatest civilization on the face of the earth face down the rising star of this crude new thing called Christianity.

It's all the more extraordinary because I realize that it might just be the moment we are living in right now. Because I feel like I and many others have been walking around the marketplace of Athens lately (except, of course, that we're not actually allowed to walk around the marketplace these days and have to engage with it from within the safety of our own homes), but many things that we've seen of the world lately have led us to call into question the assumptions that our world makes.

To put it bluntly, this pandemic crisis has shown up so many of the cracks and weak points of our society. We have been shown so clearly the flaws and the problems in our long-term care system. We have seen how short-sighted it was to allow the concentration of so much wealth into the hands of a very tiny portion of our population. We have seen how foolish it was to look down on and disdain the low-wage workers who provided for us the very basic needs of life. These are just a few examples, of course, but these together with other things have led us to think that maybe our society and the way it functioned was not really as successful and secure as we once believed that it was. Maybe it was not strong at all. Maybe it was all just an illusion.

Well, that is what Paul saw in Athens, he saw all of the cracks and shortcomings of Athenian society. And when he was put on the spot and was expected to react to the apparent impressiveness of the Areopagus by folding up and bowing before Athens' greatness, he didn't do that. He stood up to them and called them out for what they were. "**Athenians,**" he said, "**I see how extremely religious you are in every way.**" And yes, they took that as flattery. They puffed up their chests at the thought of all of their fine religious traditions.

But Paul had actually noticed a certain hollowness to their religious beliefs. He had seen it, in particular, when he found an altar dedicated to an unknown god. That seemed to indicate that, though they honoured the traditions of their ancestors, there was a sense in which their religion was just a question of covering all the bases and pleasing all the powers. Their religion was just going through the motions and had no real depth to it.

So Paul began to introduce to them the God that he knew – that he had come to know through Jesus. "**The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth.**" But as he spoke to them about this God, he said something – something that I fear we often

miss in this passage but that was a very important challenge to those people in Athens: **“From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live.”**

What Paul is talking about here is an aspect of the rule of God in this world that we don't often think about. He is describing this notion that God rules over the peoples and the nations of this world in a very particular way. This is an idea that is highlighted many times in the Bible, maybe especially in the Book of Daniel, but that we don't tend to talk about very much because it's not really a very comfortable idea.

You see, the ancient people of Israel watched from their unique observation post right in the middle of the ancient Near East as the empires and cultures that surrounded them rose and fell. They saw the rise and fall of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon and Persia. They saw Alexander the Great and the Greeks rise and fall and then the rise of Roman civilization.

They noticed something. Every empire and every civilization thought that they were the final word and that they would last forever. But every single one of them was wrong. Empires, no matter how powerful they were, all came to an end sooner or later; civilizations, no matter how civilized, never lasted. And the prophets of Israel developed this controversial idea that all of this was actually part of God's plan. That God was the one who set limitations and boundaries on the great empires and civilizations.

So what was Paul saying as he stood before the Areopagus? He was announcing that God had decided that their civilization – the great Greco-Roman civilization – had run its course. It had had a good run; it had accomplished great things. God had blessed it, which was why it had been able to accomplish what it did, but its time was almost up!

That was a pretty gutsy thing for Paul to say, but amazingly the Athenians let him get away with it. They were even interested in having him come back so they could continue their conversation with him at another time. They did it, I suspect, because they knew deep down that there was truth in what Paul was saying.

And here is where I see this incident in Paul's life really speaking to us where we are right now. I realize that, in the midst of this pandemic crisis, a lot of people are focusing on their desire to resume life as it was before all of this started. I understand that. In the midst of all this uncertainty it is natural for people to grasp onto the last thing that felt normal: the world as it was a few months ago. And so, if anyone suggests that maybe the way things were a few months ago wasn't so great and maybe we shouldn't just want to go back to that, they are going to have people pushing back at them.

But a prophetic word like what Paul said in the Areopagus may be in order. God **“allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live.”** Who are we to think that the

civilization that we had built up until February of 2020 was going to last forever? Who are we to think that it can just resume as it was after a brief pause to deal with a pandemic crisis? Everyone assumes that their way of life is just going to continue on unchanged forever but everyone who has ever assumed that has been wrong. The future of any civilization is in God's hand and always has been and we are foolish to think otherwise.

That is a very disturbing thought, of course, because it means that our future might have a lot of uncertainty in it. And I am not, by the way, trying to imply that the whole of Western civilization is about to fall. I think it's got a little bit more resilience in it than that. But I do suspect that we might, in short order, see some enormous changes in the order of our world.

It could be, for example, that we are going to see the end of the American Empire. (I know we are not supposed to call it an empire, but that is the closest biblical term to the kind of power the US has exercised in the world. And the Bible is also very clear that empires do not last forever.) I also suspect that we're going to see some serious disruptions in the economic order of our world as people can't help but notice how unessential the billionaires are to us in times of crisis while the essentialness of the people who toil at the bottom of the economy has only been highlighted. Of course, I don't claim to be a prophet and my particular predictions may be completely off base, but I think I am right about one thing. Nothing is going to just go back to the way it was before. We are in for some very serious change.

This kind of change is unsettling and scary, and it will definitely impact people's lives. But I think that what Paul would say to us is what he was trying to say to the people in Athens. Our comfort and our reassurance should not be taken from a promise that everything's just going to be the same or go back to the way that it was before. Nobody, not even God is going to promise you that. That is why our comfort needs to be taken in the Lord our God in whom **“we live and move and have our being.”**