

CCC, 21.5.17 Acts 17.22 -31, 1 Peter 3.113-22, John 14.15-21

As we look towards Ascension Day and the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, we might ask just what those well-known stories mean to us today, in such a very different world. Can we recapture the inspiration and energy of that time? Should we try to imitate the first disciples? Or do we need to dig deeper to find God's gifts for us today – for us and for the world around us?

Looking at today's story of St Paul in Athens, it might occur to us that this is a pretty good demonstration of "best missionary practice"! Paul meets people and respects them where they are. Noticing the Athenians' altar to "an unknown God" among their many shrines, he spots a desire here to know more of God than they do. There is a hunger here for the Divine, and this emboldens Paul to declare to them something of the power and majesty and splendour of God as he understood God, the God for all nations – the creator God and guide of the Jewish tradition, revealed as all-loving and all-giving in the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

Only then does he show them the limitations of their own religious practice. "God does not live in temples made by hands; God is not to be identified with an idol made of silver or gold or stone; God is beyond all human imagination, manipulation and even contemplation. Yet without God we are nothing at all. He made us, and he

continues to live in all of us, and his will is that we find him and come to live in his all encompassing love. And this God I now proclaim to you, I share with you.”

That is not just for the people of Athens in the 1st century AD. Through it, God speaks to us today. We too, even while thinking of ourselves as faithful Christians, tend to domesticate God. In fact domesticating the divine – some call it profanisation – is what all religions, Christianity included, are inclined to do. We take partial insights, favourite phrases, particular expressions of devotion – and behave as though they were the whole of God’s self-revelation. Another name for that is “idolatry”. We may be tempted then to defend our idols as “the whole truth”, against fellow Christians who have been impressed by other insights and inspired by other expressions of faith. And so, through our insistence that we must be right – whether rooted in insecurity or arrogance - we continue to cause division within the Body of Christ and alienation of every one else.

If the cap fits, let’s take it off at once!

From the very beginning, with the disagreements between Peter and Paul about accepting Gentiles in the church, there have been continuing arguments between groups of Christians, caused by our human inability to comprehend more than a fraction of the fullness of God’s being. No wonder the Emperor Constantine,

on adopting Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire in the 4th century, insisted that Christians agree on a creed – the creed which remains the reference point for the universal church today, even if we may interpret it in a variety of ways.

Yet a creed in itself is an objectification. We may cling to it as an anchor, but it remains a human summary of Christian belief, couched in the concepts of its time and place – the Eastern Mediterranean of the 4th century. It leaves little space for the mystery of the Divine Being, which Paul in today's reading recognises as both immanent, living in us, and transcendent, beyond all human comprehension. So the creed risks being reduced to closed dogma by some, while it remains puzzling to those of non-European cultures, who don't share our background in Greek philosophy.

In the name of God, let us respect their freedom to do define the faith in their own way.

Traditional creeds can also be barriers to Christian belief, because they attempt to have the last word on the mystery of God. Take the case of Stephen Fry and the recent threat to try him here for blasphemy because of his outrage at the suffering of children, whether from parasites or bone cancer. How could a good and loving God do that? Surely, said Fry, this had to be a monster – even a maniac!

Shocking words, perhaps, but this is an ancient dilemma, pondered by everyday people and great theologians and writers ever since the first century. How can a good God create a world in which the innocent suffer horribly? Free will may explain human evil, but it doesn't do much against pestilence and tsunamis. Not easy to give a simple answer in a creed – but Peter addresses it in today's reading – “even if you do suffer for doing right, you are blessed”. . . “it is better to suffer for doing good - (as Christ did, to bring you to God) - that to suffer for doing evil”.

A good effort, maybe, but not enough for those who, like Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*, in the face of the suffering of a single child respectfully hand back God's ticket to the Kingdom. Such principled unbelief demands, not trials for blasphemy but rigorous theological thinking, if we are to be able truly to “offer and account for the faith which is in us, doing it with gentleness and reverence,” as Peter urges.

Gentleness and reverence for those who differ from us have sadly not been too noticeable in the Christian churches down the years, with certain welcome exceptions. It would be good if each one of us could try to change that, looking always to recognise the good in the other, not denounce what we find unhelpful. It would be good also to look beyond our own horizons to give practical help, as individuals and as a community, to the millions of innocent people who are in desperate

straits around the world, hungry, homeless, dehumanised, terrorised, rejected. That might help people like Stephen Fry and Ivan Karamazov just a little bit.

At a recent conference in TCD on the need for continuing reform in the churches, it was encouraging to hear forward-looking Christian speakers urge new openness and humility in the churches, openness also to those of other faiths and none, in the service of the Kingdom of God. Like Paul in Athens, they warned us against the dangers of idolatry - making idols of our own ideas and habits, instead of keeping our hearts and minds open to wherever God wants to lead us.

This is why we need to be people of prayer, not just of ritual observance. This is why respect for the way God may inspire those beyond the boundaries of Christianity into the ways of goodness, truth and loving service is required. The Holy Spirit has been poured out on all flesh and as Paul told the Athenians, “God is not far from any one of us, for in him we live and move and have our being, as even some of your own poets have said.”

Jesus in today’s gospel suggests the way – and if you read more of this part of the Fourth Gospel, you will find it deeply helpful.

As Jesus says Goodbye to his friends, he promises to send The Holy Spirit when he is gone, to continue to mind them and teach them in his stead. The Spirit

will lead them into all truth. And that was not just for them then; it's for us now. The Spirit is still on the job today, and needs to be, because the church, as is clear from our divisions, has certainly not yet arrived at all truth any more than the scientists have. So are we deaf, or just not listening? Are we to be designated in John's words, as "The world (who) cannot receive him"? Perhaps there are closed minds in the church, as much as in the secular city.

Let us resolve not to be among them!

Because we are called on a daily basis to keep our hearts and minds tuned, not to the slogans or images of our particular faith tradition, but to the leading of the Holy Spirit - every bit as much as were Jesus' first disciples. And to do this in the context of both the questions and challenges of today and of the Gospel. That's the only way can we hope to live always by Jesus' command to love one another as he has loved us, not just for our own sake and for peace among Christians, but "that the world my believe - and believing may have life in his name".

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