**Sermon   Easter 6  Sunday 14/5/2023**

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

*May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen*

Good morning everyone. Very early yesterday morning a good friend of mine flew to Athens. Apparently it took her four and a half hours to fly direct from Dublin to Athens. Obviously at the time of our reading this morning from Acts, it took a lot longer for people to travel to Athens, even from the eastern Mediterranean shores where Paul was based, but travel there they did and in significant numbers.

These days, we tend to think of Greece as a holiday destination. It is a place where you can go to soak up the sun, or if you are like me, where you can immerse yourself in classical history and archaeology. Back in Paul’s day, Greece, and Athens in particular, were the cultural centre of the classical world. Rome may well have been the centre of power but Athens was still the centre of learning.

I think of Athens in Paul’s time as being more akin to Oxford or Cambridge. It was the place where people went to learn from the different philosophy schools and to engage in public debate in the Areopagus, the location of the Council of Athens. It was more than just a University city where people went to learn. It was also the public square of the classical world, if you can imagine the Oxford Union debating society, prime-time radio and television programmes, speakers’ corner in Hyde Park, social media platforms like twitter and Joe Duffy’s show all rolled into one.

In that highly charged, high-status public space, Paul took his chance to preach to the educated, the people at the heart of the intellectual public square along with all those there to enjoy the spectacle of clever public debate. He proclaimed the good news of the resurrection of Jesus, but not in his usual way. In this context, Paul spoke in language and concepts that his audience could relate to. He quoted Greek poets. He made reference to the altar to the unknown god that he had found on his earlier exploration of the city. He flattered them in their terms to engage their response.

What do we learn from Paul’s strategy in 2023? First, we learn that Paul took stock of his context before beginning to speak. So let us take stock of our own context. We are in a post-secular globalised society where we expect that the new Census figures will tell us that more of our population are now adherents of a range of world religions, plus many different denominations of Christianity. We will find out how much more of our population has now self-identified as non-believers of any faith and see themselves as strictly secular.

How does the Church of Ireland speak to this diverse society? Indeed, how do we in Christ Church cathedral speak to this diverse society? And how do we as individual Christians speak to this diverse society? My argument is that speak to the diversity of Irish society we must. In this morning’s Gospel we hear Jesus’s promise to give us an Advocate, the Spirit of truth, to be with us forever. We know from Scripture that this Spirit gives us wisdom, helps us to speak the truth of our faith even into a hostile or a disinterested world.

Second, we learn that Paul was sufficiently knowledgeable to start his preaching like any good teacher by focusing on what his listeners knew, understood and appreciated. When we speak into our diverse society, we need to know our audiences, and ensure that our message finds points of commonality, draws on culture that is familiar and does not insult or confuse the hearers.

In my work in DCU I have partnered with Dublin City Interfaith Forum, which Ginnie mentioned in her sermon last week, to produce podcasts. In these, a representative of each faith group explained their teaching about justice issues like poverty, slavery, inter-religious hatred and racism. One of the reasons we did this work was to draw attention to the points of commonality of thinking and of teaching between all world faiths when it comes to serious moral problems in the world.

As Peter said in this morning’s epistle, ‘who will harm you if you are eager to do good?’ It helps to build interfaith bridges when we realise that people of other world faiths also wish to do good and frequently have similar teachings and responses to the problems that confound the human race. And of course, these teachings have a remarkable amount in common with human rights – a modern touch-stone for those who are humanists rather than faith adherents.

Third, we learn that Paul had to cope with the fact that many of those to whom he preached did not respond positively. If you read on for the next few verses in chapter 17 of Acts, you discover that only a handful of his listeners became believers, while some of the philosophers publicly mocked him particularly for his teaching of the resurrection of Jesus. The Christian message is not an especially popular one in the Ireland of 2023 but we should not lose heart because we are ‘out of fashion’. Neither should the doubts or mockery of others undermine our own faith. Peter’s epistle warned early believers that they would suffer a lot worse than mockery or disinterest due to their faith!

Fourth, we learn from Paul that it is better to speak up, to be part of the clamour of the public square than to be silent and speak only into the comfortable echo-chamber of our fellow-believers. And it is this final one that we in Christ Church Cathedral, and in the Church of Ireland more generally, need to heed in particular. I am currently doing a piece of research in the cathedral about how its mission or religious purpose is understand and enacted. It is clear that there is a thirst among those connected with this wonderful place of worship and community to shine a light for our faith in Christ through word and action out into the public square, but there are also questions about how best we do that.

I suggest that Paul’s strategy in the Areopagus is a genuinely helpful guide nearly two thousand years later. Here is what he modelled for us. We learn from Paul:

* to make sure we know our context;
* to couch our message in terms that are culturally familiar so we build links and ensure understanding;
* to be prepared for the reality that not everyone will listen or accept what we say;
* to be willing to step outside our comfort zones and echo chambers to engage in the robust engagement of the public square.

And I finish by adding one other thing, not from St. Paul this time, but from archbishop Rowan Williams. He said: ‘don’t ask is it Anglican – make it Anglican’. It is up to us to engage with our current culture and society, to discern its links with our faith, then clearly communicate what we believe respectfully, generously and courageously with all around us.

*Let us pray*

Christ our Lord, you promised to send us an Advocate, a spirit of wisdom, truth and courage to guide our engagement with the world as faithful disciples. Open us up to receive afresh your Spirit so that we discern Paul’s courage to speak and enact our Christian faith into the world around us.

**Amen**