

“A POSTCARD FROM ATHENS”

Acts 17:16-34

Well, the last postcard we had from Paul was from Thessalonica, where the activities of the little group of evangelists had provoked a riot. The Christians there wanted to get Paul and Silas safely away, so they smuggled them off to Berea, where the citizens were, according to Luke, “*of more noble character than the Thessalonians*” (17:11). Unfortunately, Paul’s opponents managed to follow him there too and were causing more problems, so his colleagues told him to move on again. While Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea, Paul went on alone to Athens and waited there for the rest of them to catch up. That’s where today’s postcard is from.

Athens was an amazing city. Its real glory days were in the past, but it was still a pretty impressive place and Paul took the opportunity to do a bit of sightseeing while he waited for the rest of the group. He wasn’t exactly the tourist from the sticks overwhelmed by what he saw, but he was certainly affected by the whole feel of the place. It was full of monuments and statues honouring the many gods of the Greek pantheon. Everywhere he looked there were altars and tablets, temples and shrines. One contemporary writer suggested that there were more gods than people in Athens at the time! For a person such as Paul coming from a culture where monotheistic religion was the norm – both Judaism and Christianity were centred on one god – this was shocking. As an educated man, Paul must have known that the Greeks worshipped a number of gods, but he was still deeply upset by what he saw there. It was a cause of real difficulty for him and he was clearly not prepared to simply let it go.

So he goes off to the synagogue, as he normally does, and starts to discuss it with the Jews and the Jewish sympathisers amongst the Greeks. They have been living in this culture for a while, so it doesn’t have the same impact on them: they’ve got used to the background of unremitting idolatry and it maybe doesn’t affect them as it does Paul. He also goes off to the market – the place where people go not only for their daily supplies, but also for their social interaction – and starts to talk to the people there about it. It’s there that he encounters the intellectuals – the Epicureans and the Stoics. In very, very simple terms, the Epicureans were people who believed that the gods were either remote or non-existent, so they had no bearing on one’s day to day life and one might as well just get on and enjoy it as much as possible. The Stoics wanted everyone to live in harmony with nature because the gods were pretty well present in everything.

These intellectuals, who were always on the lookout for new ideas (v21), invited Paul to come and have a chat with them at their usual meeting place, the Areopagus, or Mars Hill. They were desperate not to miss out on a possible new trendy philosophy. It’s a great opportunity for Paul and he naturally grabs it with both hands. He’s here with the Greek elite, with people who want to think, who want to hear what he has to say. It’s a bit like being asked to appear on *Start The Week* on Radio 4 or on *The Culture Show* on BBC2. And once again, Luke gives us the outline of what he says to these culture vultures. (I say the outline, as what is written here would have taken less than two minutes to say – Paul clearly spoke for longer than that.) What is interesting, though, is not so much what he says – although that is important, obviously – but the way in which he says it. And it gives us a pretty good template for our attempts to talk about Jesus today.

Paul has looked around Athens and has been deeply upset by what he considers to be their idolatry. He could simply have launched into a tirade against their false religion and their self-centred philosophies. He could have shouted at them about how evil they were and backed it up with lots of verses from his Scriptures, the Old Testament. That’s very often the way of evangelism isn’t it? Stand on a street corner, yell at everyone about how sinful they are and prove it with Bible verses. Paul very wisely avoids that approach. He starts, in fact, by commenting on how religious they are (v22). A city with that many temples, shrines and statues must have been a very religious place to be.

And what he noticed, in his touristy wanderings, was that amongst all the other altars, the Athenians had hedged their bets, just in case they’d somehow missed out a god who was necessary for some aspect of

their wellbeing – he noticed the altar “To An Unknown God”. Paul realises that they are searching for something and tells them that he is going to help them to get to know this unknown god, the god who is, in fact, the most important of the lot. He starts where they are. No talk of sin or judgement or even of Christianity yet.

Then he goes on to talk about creation and the god who made it. He relates what he is saying to what they can actually observe. It’s a bit like his opening words in *The Letter to the Romans*. He connects with them on a level that they can grasp. We said that there were no quotations from the Bible here – that would have meant nothing to these people, unlike the Jews, in whose synagogues Paul always quoted from Scripture. Here he quotes from their own poets – from Epimenides, a Cretan poet who lived about 600BC; and from the third century BC Cilician poet Aratus (v28). These were words they would have been a bit more familiar with than verses from the Old Testament.

Paul links all this with the images that he has seen around the city, capitalising on their obvious desire to have a clear philosophy of life, and begins to weave in something about God’s desire for people to relate to him and the part Jesus played in guaranteeing this through his resurrection from the dead. He doesn’t try to include everything here – this is, after all, his first opportunity he has had to say anything. Notice that there is no mention of the cross, for example. Paul is expecting to have an opportunity to follow this up and he is just setting out the very basic introduction to it here. That’s not to say that it’s not challenging: he mentions repentance at least, and he wants them to have a personal encounter with God – he is going to make the “Unknown” known.

Once again, as we’ve seen before in Paul’s preaching, there is a variety of responses. Some people “sneered”. Some wanted to follow it up with more discussion. And there were a few who actually took a step of faith that day and believed. That’s always going to be the way when the good news is proclaimed – there will be a variety of responses: people may sneer, but others will believe.

Now, I said a few moments ago, that this provides a good template for us in our own situation. We can take a number of principles from this and apply them to our own situation today. It’s interesting that Luke chooses to mention these two schools of philosophy, the Epicureans and the Stoics. I know I simplified their beliefs and there are all sorts of other things we could have said about them (and those of you who have done any philosophy may well pick me up on it afterwards), but they pretty well exemplify the two main currents of thought in our culture today. On the one hand there is the vast majority of people who either do not believe in a god at all or think he is just too remote to have anything to do with us and therefore doesn’t really matter. The recent publicity given to such atheists as Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins has managed to convince many people that they don’t need a god at all. Many others have no idea that God is interested in them at all. They go through the motions of religion because it is of some use to them in a vaguely social way, but they certainly don’t expect God to respond to them. Some years ago now, A N Whitehead wrote of British society, “*Religion is tending to degenerate into a decent formula wherewith to embellish a comfortable life.*” On the whole, though, all these people live for the moment, trying to get as much enjoyment out of the present as they can, because there is effectively nothing else to worry about. That explains in part, for example, the huge problem of debt, the continuing rise in promiscuity and sexual adventurism, binge drinking, obesity and many of the other apparent ills which are affecting our culture. If there’s no god, nothing beyond this life, then live for the moment, don’t worry about the future and don’t spend too much time thinking about the effect your actions will have on other people.

On the other hand, there are those who are like the Stoics, who have a veneer of religiosity and want to believe that there is something beyond the merely human. These people look for signs of the divine in everything, maintaining that the very creation itself is a god to be worshipped and nurtured. They want to live in harmony with nature and try to see and interconnectedness in everything. We rather sloppily bundle it all up under the heading of “New Age”, but we see its effects in the fundamentalist environmentalism that is sweeping our world, in people’s desire for holistic healing through crystals, herbs and all kinds of strange spiritualities, in the enthusiasm for getting through to the spirit world

(exemplified in such things as the little shop round the corner from here and Philip Solomon's sell-out show at the Garrick next month).

In short, our culture looks very much like that of the Athenians whom Paul encountered – and that is without mentioning the temples we have erected to consumerism and narcissism and Mammon. How do we respond? I suppose the first question must be, **Do we care?** Does what we see going on around us lead to the kind of distress that Paul experienced? It's interesting that the Greek word translated "distressed" here is the Greek word that is used to describe God's anger and sadness at the idolatry of the Jewish people in the Old Testament. For most of us, I guess, we are so immersed in the culture of our community that we haven't really noticed how bad it is. We may even be bored with the constant reports of crime and the daily assault on our senses by a world obsessed with money, sex, celebrity and self-satisfaction. Those who visit your culture from elsewhere (as Paul was doing) notice. I was talking to someone who had come to Britain from another culture just last week and he said he was surprised at how unchristian Britain was. We won't have any impact on our society if we don't really think there's too much wrong with it.

So, assuming we are "*distressed*" by what we see, what should we do? Do we stand up and shout Bible verses at people? Do we rail against the idolatry of our age? Do we threaten people with punishment, with judgment and with hell? Do we write strong letters to the press and to our national and religious leaders? What did Paul do? He began where people were. He didn't stamp his feet and shout a lot, but started off positively. He understood their deeply held desire for some kind of meaning in life and their recognition that there must be something beyond this life – "*I see that in every way you are very religious.*" He found a common point of reference and was positive about it. It's easy to laugh at people like Philip Solomon (a medium, by the way, who has a regular column in *The Express & Star* which capitalises on the vulnerability of the bereaved) and those who write to him and attend his shows, but wouldn't it be better to offer people a real alternative, to show compassion to those who clearly need it.

And, although I would not for one moment want to downplay the importance of the Bible in our proclamation of the Good News, is quoting Scripture really the best way to **start**? Can we not, as Paul does, find common ground in the culture of our day? I'm not sure that we would all want to quote classical poetry at our friends, but that was what Paul and his listeners had in common. We might use examples from *Coronation Street* or a Nick Hornby novel or a Coldplay song or an article in today's newspaper to illustrate what we are trying to say about Jesus.

Remember, Paul was talking with people who had no idea about Jesus, who had never heard of him, who had never even come across the Old Testament. So he didn't try and give them the whole works in one go. More and more of our contemporaries are living their lives with no idea about Jesus nor about the Bible. We cannot expect them suddenly to understand the whole story. (Did you?) So we must be prepared to explain carefully and probably slowly, over a number of occasions. We must be ready to listen to their questions, not bombard them with answers to questions they are not asking.

Paul gave his listeners a choice and explained the consequence of that choice, inviting a response from them. But, like Paul, we must be aware that not everyone will want to respond positively. Of course, there may be some who immediately want to accept that Jesus is their Saviour – we cannot underestimate the power of the Holy Spirit in this. But there will always be those who just will not or cannot believe. The vast majority will probably want to follow things up with another conversation. And that's where friendship and consistency come in. Paul often took a great deal of time to proclaim the case for Jesus Christ. In Ephesus, for example, he spent three months in the synagogue and then another two years in a nearby public hall. But God blessed his ministry in ways that have we have rarely seen since.

Let's just sum up, then. Are we at all concerned about the culture in which we find ourselves and the way it seems so far away from what God seems to want? If so, are we ready to talk to those around us from a positive starting point, speaking to them on terms that they understand? Are we prepared to put to people the choice that they have and the consequences of that choice? And are we ready to be patient, to keep on

praying to God and talking to our friends, even when we don't get immediate results? We need to pray that the Holy Spirit will work in us, to give us discernment and courage, and work in others to enable them to hear and respond to the offer of life which only Jesus can provide.

Discussion notes on next page

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While Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea, Paul went on alone to Athens and waited there for the rest of them to catch up. Athens was an amazing city. Its real glory days were in the past, but it was still an impressive place and Paul took the opportunity to do a bit of sightseeing. He was certainly affected by the whole feel of the place. It was full of monuments and statues honouring the many gods of the Greek pantheon. For a person such as Paul coming from a culture where monotheistic religion was the norm this was shocking.

So he goes off to the synagogue and the market and starts to discuss it. He encounters the intellectuals – the Epicureans and the Stoics. In simple terms, the Epicureans were people who believed that the gods were either remote or non-existent, so they had no bearing on one's day to day life and one might as well just get on and enjoy it as much as possible. The Stoics wanted everyone to live in harmony with nature because the gods were pretty well present in everything. Paul discusses with them at the Areopagus and it gives us a pretty good template for our attempts to talk about Jesus today.

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This provides a good template for us in our own situation. We can take a number of principles from this and apply them to our own situation today. As far as a philosophy of life is concerned, on the one hand there is the vast majority of people who either do not believe in a god at all or think he is just too remote to have anything to do with us and therefore doesn't really matter. That explains in part, for example, the huge problem of debt, the continuing rise in promiscuity and sexual adventurism, binge drinking, obesity and many of the other apparent ills which are affecting our culture. If there's no god, nothing beyond this life, then live for the moment, don't worry about the future and don't spend too much time thinking about the effect your actions will have on other people.

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threaten people with punishment, with judgment and with hell? Do we write strong letters to the press and to our national and religious leaders? What did Paul do? He began where people were. He started off positively. He understood their deeply held desire for some kind of meaning in life and their recognition that there must be something beyond this life. Can we offer people a real alternative, to show compassion to those who clearly need it? And is quoting Scripture really the best way to **start**? Can we not, as Paul does, find common ground in the culture of our day?

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Questions for discussion

1. Are we at all concerned about the culture in which we find ourselves? Why/why not?
2. How would you sum up the prevailing attitude to life of most people in our culture?
3. Where might we find common ground to begin a conversation about God with those around us?
4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of quoting from the Bible at people?
5. How could we create opportunities to talk to people about Jesus?
6. Is there anything particular that has struck you from this passage?