

Salvation is in Christ Alone

Sunday 21st May 2017

St. John's Presbyterian, Mt. Roskill

Rev. Dr. Colin S. Marshall

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

We are living in a shrinking world. In a few weeks our Hebron mission team will travel to Tanzania. The trip, to the other side of the world, will take a total of about 40 hours once it would have taken months. Now: a day and a half. The most inaccessible parts of the world are now open to the hardy tourist and adventurer. Explorers are struggling to find places that others have not already been. This week medical authorities told us that New Zealand's distance no longer shields us from plagues and disease. What the world suffers we receive daily through our airlines, travellers and immigrants. The same might be said of spiritual faith. Where once Christianity was really the only religion of New Zealand, even if only a small percentage of the population practiced it, today the situation is vastly different. Along with waves of immigration, from the English settlers in the north, the Scots settlers and gold-diggers in the south, the early Asian gardeners in Auckland, the Americans of the 1940's, through to waves of immigrants from all over the world in the last two decades, has also come a plethora of religious and spiritual belief systems. Along with a rampant materialism, these ideologies have challenged the blasé Christian faith of the country. New Zealand has long been called a Christian country but for the last half century the name is poorly applied. Researchers tell us that the greatest level of Christian faith profession was in the 1860's when 100% of everyone surveyed professed a Christian faith. And guess who were surveyed ... surely not the indigenous peoples or many of the workers. Since then, numbers have steadily declined such that Christian affiliation is now just over 40% and actual weekly active involvement in churches is less than 10%. While some may be greatly concerned, particularly those in church hierarchies, we can and should take a different approach. People who come to church now are not there because that is what society dictates we must do. It is not because the church is the only social centre in town or because that's the best place to meet a nice boy or girl. Many of the people at church today are so because they have a real and alive faith and seek to live out the Christian life as Jesus taught. And yes, of course, there are still those of a cultural background that says they have to be in church on Sunday regardless of what they do the rest of the week, but that hypocrisy is now seriously being challenged by those of genuine faith. The exciting news is that we live in the greatest time of missionary opportunity since Jesus walked on earth. We live in the generations that have the opportunity to share the gospel with many who have never really heard it or seen it lived out. We have the opportunity to go taking Jesus' light into the darkness, we go to bring to salvation those who are walking without true light, vision or hope. We are entrusted with the greatest responsibility of all – to bring people to salvation in Jesus Christ. Not that we do the work of salvation, that is Christ's work by the Holy Spirit, but we are called to play our part speaking to a polytheistic, pluralistic, multi-cultural, narcissistic world. A world just like that of the New Testament. A world Jesus and the apostles would have been familiar with.

This brings us to some lessons that we can learn from Paul in Athens some 2000 years ago. Acts 17 takes us back to a time when the Greeks were considered the elite world culture for education, philosophy and spiritual advancement. The best of the Roman world stole from Greek wisdom unashamedly. Acts 17 takes us to the Athenian marketplace and then to the Areopagus on Mars Hill in Athens (or more literally "the hill of Ares" the Greek god of war). The Areopagus, contrary to popular thought is not a building. The Areopagus is large outcrop of rock to the west of the Acropolis, usually bathed in sunlight, where the men of the city loved to gather to sit around and discuss things. More particularly it was where the Athenian Court of Justice met. Here the nine judges of Greece, who met as a council in various

places, met to hear cases and dispense justice. With all the wonderful buildings of Athens it was here, in the open air, accessible by the public, where justice and a “fair” hearing were to be found. A forerunner of the modern court, the orators stole the show as they swayed the listeners in favour of their cause. For contentious and popular cases, the hillside would be crowded with people but day to day smaller numbers of men would sit about and discuss the issues of the world. It was the café bar of today’s world. It is to this place that the Greeks brought the apostle Paul.

For Paul this was a challenging time. For the first, and almost only time in his missionary travels, the apostle Paul is on his own. He came to Athens as many still do today; looking at the statues and buildings, the architecture, the history, the seat of political and social developments for generations, the home of the Olympiad, Athens was a marvel of history in itself. Reflecting that early religious democracy the Roman Marcus Agrippa would later build the Pantheon in Rome and bring the “gods” of the world to be housed there. Paul must have felt like many Christians do seeing the increasing number of pagan gods appearing all over the place. Following his regular pattern, Paul went first to the synagogue to share the good news with the Jews there. Then, he went to the market place and began to speak to the crowds of shoppers in the public square. Some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers of the city heard him speaking. The Epicureans distained all spirituality and instead focussed on a tranquil simple life, avoiding pain and living simply. Their greatest attainment was a peaceable gathering of knowledge about the world. The views of the Stoics were not greatly different. They believed in an acceptance of one’s lot and the disciplined control of human emotions. They understood that human emotions were a destructive force and true balance was found in a study of nature. For the Stoic how one lived rather than what one said that was important. Logic, self-control and a comprehension of universal reason (that they called the *logos*) was central to life and personal fulfilment. Hearing Paul they were both attracted and confused. Paul, in preaching Jesus and what Jesus had taught, brought to their ears some concepts they could understand and agree with and other that they would oppose and disagree on. For the Epicureans in particular the thought of resurrection was absurd. But Jesus’ teachings, particular such as those of the Sermon on the Mount would have resonated well. For some, Paul appeared a babbler that brought bits and pieces of philosophy into an incoherent whole. They decided to bring Paul to the Areopagus to be heard more formally.

It is here that we see Paul attempting something that is core to public speaking. He tries to identify with his audience by identifying what they have in common – in this case recognising their inherent spirituality. In Athens he sees dozens of pagan idols, statues to various gods, even one to the Unknown God. The Athenians didn’t want to risk offending a god they didn’t know so they covered all the bases. Paul sees this as an acknowledgement of their ignorance but willingness to learn and this provides a springboard for engaging with them. He links with the core of Epicurean and Stoic philosophy by almost distaining the physical; buildings and man-made temples. Paul then quotes their own poets observing they had noted that the divine is not far from us, a view not uncommon today. Paul quotes one of their poets : *“in him we live and move and have our being ... for we too are his offspring”*. However given that the quote actually comes from the Greek poet Aratus and was part of an invocation to Zeus, Paul begins to get on theologically shaky ground. What he is attempting to do is link to the philosophers thought to engage them and then springboard forward. So far so good. Then he links God’s judgement of mankind with a focus on the false lure of the material so many are caught up in. Sound familiar? Those who have based their lives upon the acquisition of material wealth and distained the greater things will be judged for their ignorance and disobedience. So far so good. The Stoics and Epicureans, so appropriately meeting in the fresh air, would have been with Paul all the way so far. This, for them, was

practical religion. Then Paul redirects their attention to Jesus. He is the one who God has set to judge the world and God has confirmed this by raising Jesus from the dead. But this sudden transition is not appreciated by the philosophers. Paul has launched seamlessly from practical religion to a spiritual dimension of human physical resurrection that their ethos, so grounded in the natural order cannot accept. Dispute and argument breaks out and the moment is lost. A few want to hear more but essentially Paul's opportunity is over.

What can we learn from this? What did Paul learn? He learnt that an approach that tries to integrate too much of the existing belief of a culture is very dangerous. It builds cultural expectations that the gospel will inevitably challenge head on at some stage. It places the speaker in the position of arrogantly thinking they know a culture well enough to speak into it in its own terms when in reality we can never know the fullness of the subtleties of another culture. We struggle enough with our own. If Paul had continued speaking of Jesus and then described His death and resurrection as he would later do with the Corinthians and then raised the implications, he would likely have been better accepted.

Paul essentially went on from Athens to Corinth by which time he had determined the core of what would be his missionary approach thereafter. He expounds this approach so clearly, and appropriately, at the beginning of 1 Corinthians 2: ***When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.***

This is immensely helpful for us in sharing the gospel. The core of our faith and missionary endeavour is Jesus. What we need to be sharing with our friends and family is Jesus – about His existence, His life, His death and why. Salvation is in Jesus alone. Like Paul we come in fear and weakness. Even great trembling. What will people think when I share Jesus? Will I look stupid? I hardly know the culture well enough. I don't know enough... so too Paul came to Corinth after only minimal success in Athens. Now Paul knew that his own wisdom, cleverness and preaching passion would not be enough it needed something else. Instead he needed to rely on something other than his own abilities, great as they were. He needed simply to preach Jesus, to speak Jesus, to tell His story and what Jesus taught and let God do the rest. Why? Because the work of salvation is God's and He convicts of sin and brings about faith as a gift. His power is demonstrated in changed lives. The task we are called to is to simply speak about, to lift up, Jesus.

The gospel is clear. In John 3:36 we have the words of Jesus: ***“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life but the wrath of God remains on him.”*** God is giving people opportunities to be saved but their time will run out. Saved from what? Saved from their own sin that unaddressed will separate them from God eternally and send them to eternal punishment. Our works, our goodness will never save us. There are no eternal scales of good v bad. We can never be good enough. Only through Jesus, God's perfect sacrifice, can our sin be taken away and can we walk the path and be obedient as Jesus was. Jesus commands us to repent and believe in the gospel (Mark 1:14-15) and then to walk the walk – to be obedient to what He has taught and what He calls us to do today. Not that these works will save us, that work is complete in Christ, but so that we can live lives, build families and communities that reflect and bring glory to God. So that we can take our place in the community of His people as we should.

I believe in today's Auckland and in all the world this is what is needed now. The world needs to turn and look at Jesus; who He was, what He said and taught, and what He has done for us. So many people know nothing about Jesus at all and their destiny is destruction. And God's A plan, and there is no Plan B, is for us to speak to the world – one by one.

In John 14 Jesus tells us twice that we are to obey His commands and that He will give us the Holy Spirit will empower us beyond what we are capable of by ourselves of our own volition. The two go hand in hand. If we want to see the power of His Holy Spirit at work in our lives and if we want to be effective in speaking into others' lives for Him then we need to live life His way. In this the Epicureans and Stoics were right though their focus was wrong. In the simplicity of walking in Jesus' footsteps there is great peace, contentment and the absence of fear that makes the issues of the world pale into insignificance. Jesus reminds us that to love God is to obey His commandments, to do love to one another, action not emotion, and when we do this God will love us and Jesus will reveal Himself to us. Worldly wisdom will fail. Material things will pass away. Pagan idols and false religion will be burnt away. But the words of the Lord will remain forever. So, as the apostle Peter put it: always be ready to give an answer for the hope that is in you ... and that hope is Jesus. Jesus is not a worldly-wise answer but a simple one. In the name of Jesus is all the hope and love, power, strength and purpose that we could ever hope for. For us today we need to come back to basics: salvation is through Christ alone. Jesus is the name we are called to speak out into our worlds and His is the life we need to live so that we can fully have life.

Amen.