

Easter VI

April 27, 2008

Every three years we hear this set of lesson. We hear Jesus say to us “I am in the father and you in me and I in you” and we hear the story from Acts about Paul preaching in Athens. And every three years these readings move me in special ways, because they shine a light on what I see as absolutely *the* central religious issue Christian people in our country, and in our society generally, are facing. I want to try to deal with that just a bit this morning; and the place to start is Athens in Paul’s day. After all, Athens is the birthplace of a big part of our culture—arts, music, politics, mathematics, drama, science, philosophy and careful, critical thinking in general, all of these were, at least in part, gifts to us from Athens, and from the cultures Athens inspired.

When Paul preached in the Areopagus around the year 51, Athens was well aware of its reputation and its legacy. It had become the ultimate University town, and it wrote the book on intellectual openness. In Athens, all ideas were equally welcomed and equally examined; and almost everyone was *very* understanding. What was important was that you would discuss and listen; and that you were both clever and articulate. In first century Athens, there were tons of intellectual and religious alternatives, but there was not much in the way of a shared vision. Everything was up for grabs. That’s the world Paul faced when he stood, quite literally, where Socrates, Plato and Aristotle had stood, and tried to preach.

But that world of openness, options, and variety was, for better or for worse, about to change. Within a relatively short time, Christianity became the official, and then the dominant, religion in the Roman Empire. Next thing you know, a Christian emperor had closed all of the ancient schools in Athens and run the philosophers out of town. Rather quickly, with equal amounts of help from the Church and the barbarians, the sort of intellectual and religious smorgasbord that Athens had offered and epitomized had simply vanished from the West.

For better or for worse, a new era, the era of Christendom, had began—a time when Christianity was the preferred, proclaimed and protected religion of the entire culture.

During this era it was assumed that Christianity had a unique place and a special claim not only on the social and political institutions of the society, but also on truth itself, and so on both the content and limits of acceptable thought and on the options that were available to civilized individuals and groups. In Christendom, all ideas were not considered equal, and the traditional faith was assumed to be the backbone of the society. This was the way of our part of the world for around 1,600 years. That's a long time—it sinks in. And there are still sizable chunks of Christendom hanging around (especially, I think, in the central time zone). In fact, most of grew up with many of the assumptions and preconceptions of Christendom as natural to us as the air we breathed.

What has happened, or one of the things that has happened, to us and to Western Culture in the last several decades is that, again for better or for worse, Christendom is dying; and Athens is back. For the first time in well over 1,600 years, the Athens that Paul knew has become the norm for western civilization, and even for much of our little part of it. Christianity may receive lip service from many, indeed most, people, but it is slipping away as the live and lively faith of our culture. *Variety* is becoming the live and lively faith of our culture. When we walk out of that door, into the world we are to serve, we are back in Athens. And nobody has been there for a long, long time. (By the way, and not that it matters—what's real is real—by the way, I suspect that, with some real losses, this shift is probably a good thing—it is certainly a more honest thing.)

Be that as it may, the simple fact is that we can no longer assume that there is much, if any, of a shared core of values and traditions in our culture, or among the folks we meet. Even in around here. Where I have seen this most clearly was with my students at Howard College in Big Spring, (and, no doubt, I will see it again, if more articulately, when I start teaching at Midland College this Fall). These folks include the first truly unchurched generation in American history; and it's a little spooky.

One small but telling example is that I have discovered that I can't make references to even the most well known Bible stories and expect to be understood. Even Adam and Eve often get blank stares from a surprising number of students. (Now, at Howard college, I couldn't make references to Shakespear, either; but that's a somewhat different, if related, problem.) None of us has to look very far to see the same thing. It's everywhere; it's where we are.

This means that we need to look very carefully at what Paul says and does. He is addressing us, our culture, and there's a chance that we can learn something from him about abiding in Jesus and living in Athens. One way to get at this is to begin by noticing what Paul does not say. He does not say that the people of Athens are immoral fools, stupid, ignorant, wrong-headed, hell-bound secular humanists who are going to burn forever and who *ought* to burn forever. He doesn't say that they know nothing and that he knows everything. That's the first thing he doesn't say. He doesn't attack, and he doesn't ridicule.

On the other hand, he also does not say that, since they are after all extremely religious and sincere, then he, Paul, really doesn't have anything to say to them. He doesn't do that, either. Paul knew with whom he abided. So he doesn't cop out, either.

What Paul says to the people of Athens is that they are very close. Now, Paul's sermon here is totally unlike anything else we ever hear from him. He doesn't talk about the Scriptures, or the Law of Moses, or anything like that. Instead, using contemporary Greek rhetorical tools and sources—in fact, his first few words are a direct quote from Plato—Paul says to the Athenians that their search is part of the universal, noble, indeed divinely inspired human quest for God. He says that they have been working hard on this sacred quest, and that they have come very close to the truth, to their goal; but they are missing one thing. One vital thing.

What is that? Again, notice that at Paul doesn't tell them that they are missing a better philosophy, or a more useful morality. He doesn't suggest that they are missing a handy tool for success, or a better building to meet in, or a more exciting form of worship. And Paul doesn't even say that their real problem is either an ignorance of mystical secrets or a lack of self-esteem.

In fact, they are not missing anything they can find by themselves or within themselves; instead, he insists, they are missing something they can only get from Paul.

They are missing Jesus, and the community Jesus creates. That's what it all boils down to. The fullness of God, and of God's love—these are what they are missing. That had been unknown; but now it could be known.

This is what Paul preached, finally. And he preached it without attacking, without histrionics, without self-righteousness and (for quite a while) without much success. But he offered what he had, and he said they were so close they could almost taste the truth.

I suspect that this is what we have to say to Athens as it exists outside of that door. Our culture, in all its silly, evil, and death-centered madness, is really quite close. Our culture is seeking in a pathetic frenzy the same unknown god to whom Athens (having, if nothing else, better taste than we do) built statues. Our culture knows there is more to life than the egoism, acquisitiveness, sensuality and simplistic relativism that seem to drive its thinking these days. Without always knowing it, it is seeking the one whom we do know, the one who rules us from a cross.

We might not have to say much else, but we do have to say *that*. We have to talk about Jesus. Somehow. Maybe even with words. And, as a parish and as individuals, we, like Paul, need to try all sorts of things, things both old new, in order to do that.

—things like updating our web site to more visible outreach, a deepening engagement with our city; things like modeling, both among ourselves and to anyone who might care to look, the vitality, challenge, and hope that Christ offers, things like actually inviting people to church. We need to try and to do things, both old and new, that point the way, things that invite and welcome, that make sense and make space and make time for people desperate to know what Paul knew, and what we know.

There is a great spiritual hunger out there, just as there was in Paul's time; and, like him, we are called to name the healing for that hunger that we have found—not self-righteously, not as a part of any social, political, or otherwise selfish agenda; not as a smug put-down, but, instead, as the honest showing and sharing of a gracious gift we have received. If we do anything other than this, we do something less. For we are part of one vine, and we must abide in that vine. That's who we are, and that's part of the truth

For better and for worse, Athens is back; it's right out there. Our clever neighbors, like the crowd around Paul, are listening a little to what we have to say, and looking very closely at who we are and how we live. And, like Paul in the middle of the Areopagus, it is our time to say something.