

## Acts 17:22-31

Some people like to travel. They are fascinated by different cultures. They enjoy different foods, they study different lifestyles, they try to speak different languages and they observe different religions and worship.

About 50 AD there was a travelling Jew who entered the city of Athens. He had travelled through Judea, Arabia, Asia and Greece and had originally come from the Syrian city of Tarsus. As this seasoned traveller wandered about Athens he was struck by the monuments and temples. But the way he was struck was not the same way most travellers would be struck. Paul had been met by the risen Christ and since then had devoted his life to seeking Christ's honour and proclaiming Christ's blessings.

Perhaps Paul saw the beauty of the buildings and the charm of city but that was not what struck him. What he could see was that the city was full of idols and the more he saw, the more his "spirit was provoked within in him". He felt a "paroxysm" in his being. Although his two companions were not with him he could not contain the jealousy he felt for his Lord. So he began to preach Sabbath by Sabbath in the synagogue that Jesus was the Christ. Day by day he would go to the market place and explain to anyone who would listen that Jesus had been raised from the dead. It was not too long before the officials of the Areopagus, that august body that had authority in the city in moral and religious matters, invited him to address them about this new and different religion.

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When he appeared before them he preached there what he had always preached. It was about Jesus and his resurrection. His address began with the assertion that God was the creator of all things and ended with the conclusion that therefore God was the judge of all things. Today we shall look at Paul's sermon in Athens.

### **Firstly He is the Unknown God v23-25.**

While meandering about the city Paul came across an altar with the inscription "to an unknown god". It was this God the Athenians did not know, that he wished to make known to them. For all the many gods they worshipped the true and only God they did not know.

This was the God who made all the world and everything in it. He was the Lord of heaven and earth. He was the God who could not be contained in some temple or shrine made by human hands. He inhabited the whole of the universe. No star or moon or planet was beyond his reach. In fact he made them all and directed all their movements.

Also since God's glory is so great he is not dependent on anything or anyone. He is not dependent on the sacrificial offerings by men or women nor anything they might dedicate to him. The very opposite is the case. All humanity depends on God. Anything a person has, mental ingenuity or physical prowess, even life and breath, all come from him. We are utterly dependent upon him for everything. This is the God they did not know.

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### **Secondly there is the humanity this God has made v26-29.**

The Greeks may think themselves the most advanced nation of the then known world but they ought to realise that all people have a common ancestry. Many peoples inhabit the earth and occupy many lands. Many nations have times of ascendancy and times of weakness. There are the seasons of summer and winter and of rains and drought. All these God gives so that the nations might seek after him and find him.

In their own literature they will find evidence of poets recognising some of these truths that Paul is expounding. Epimenides the Cretan could write, "In thee we live and move and have our being". Paul's fellow Cilician, Aratus, writing of Zeus as the Supreme Being of Greek philosophy, could say, "we are also his offspring." Paul was not endorsing the whole world view of these poets but he was indicating that there was recognition here and there even in their own culture some of the truths he was preaching.

### **Thirdly there is the response God now requires v30-31**

The right response to God's goodness in the creation is to seek the God who made everything, who gives all life and upon whom all depends and to trust him. The wrong response is idolatry. God is not some object fashioned by human hands whether made from gold or silver or stone or anything else. No matter how beautifully or imaginatively crafted it is not a god nor can it represent God. It did not create nor can it sustain the world nor can it represent such a creator or sustainer.

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While Paul would maintain that God's deity could be seen in creation and that what the law requires is written on people's hearts (Rom 1:20, 2:15) he could also look at the Gentile world and say they had lived in times of ignorance. The Gentiles had not had the law and the prophets that the Jews had had.

However if there had been times of ignorance for the Gentiles that was no longer the situation. Paul was preaching in a time of knowledge. God had sent his Son and Judge into the world. He had fixed a day in his own mind when all humanity would be judged. He had revealed who would be the Judge. The man Jesus whom Paul preached would be the Judge and God had given ample proof that he would be the one by raising him from death. In the light of God's extraordinary action now is the time for repentance. Now is the time to believe in the one true God and be saved.

AND what was the result of Paul's preaching to this august body. Predictable enough! Some were incredulous that Paul would preach about a resurrected man and mocked this outrageous claim by this gullible Jew. Some were more polite and gave the highly improbable line, "We will hear you again about this". Then there were others who joined him and believed. Among them notably was Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris.

Any preacher worth his salt is bound to ask his hearers. To which class of hearers do you belong? The mockers, the politely indifferent or those who join themselves to the apostle's teaching and believe?