

ACTS 17:16-31
TOUR-BUS CHRISTIANS.

We're in Athens this week: has anyone been there?
Why were you there?
What did you see there?
How did it feel?

Athens, the great capital of Greece, the centre of civilization, the capital of ancient Greek culture; the city was a huge cultural force in the ancient world, even if it has been eclipsed by Rome politically and militarily. There was a tradition of intellectual independence and philosophical thought and debate; so many of the ideas that shape our world found their origin in ancient Greece; their religion was a powerful force in shaping their culture. Paul with time to spare, waiting for Silas and Timothy to join him, wanders round the city; but he is not visiting Athens to see the sights! He has come there to escape from Thessalonica and then from the Thessalonian invasion of Berea; the Christians in Berea sent Paul to Athens for his safety and he has time on his hands. He wanders round the city, this great city at the centre of ancient Greek culture and all that we have described. But Paul is in Athens, "not as a tourist, but as an ambassador for Christ." (Philip) and that changes the way he looks at what he sees.

What did Paul see? "*While Paul...*" (Acts 17:16) "*Men of...*" (Acts 17:22f) he saw the sights; he saw 17 temples to Zeus (the god of the sky and the ruler of the gods), to Aphrodite (the goddess love and beauty), to Athena (the goddess who gave the city its name, the goddess of wisdom and courage), to Apollo, Jupiter, Venus, Diana and so many more; there were more gods in Athens than in the rest of country; there was a god for every aspect of life. The scale was huge: these gods were made of stone, brass, gold, silver, ivory, marble; in the Parthenon stood a huge gold and ivory statue of Athena 'whose gleaming spear-point was visible 40 miles away' (Stott) People brought offerings to these temples and asked the gods for help, for good fortune in their enterprises, for wisdom and so on. Paul would not be blind to the beauty of these statues; he saw the splendour of ancient Athens. But he saw something else too: he saw a people who didn't know the reality of God. They had this altar to the 'Unknown God' - "*As I...*" (Acts 17:23) he saw a people lost, not really knowing what this unknown God is like.

What did Paul feel? "*While Paul...*" (Acts 17:16) the word means 'provoked'; Paul was provoked by what he saw. He was provoked by a city full of idols, symbolic of people who didn't know God and whose life and culture were being shaped by these gods made of stone. Paul also knew his bible and knew that everywhere in the Bible where idols and statues are mentioned as objects of worship, they are always seen as leading people away from God. He knew Isaiah 44 and if you read it you'll see what God thinks of statues of wood and stone to which people bring offerings of worship. God loves the world and the world is made to love God, but something else gets in the way to spoil that relationship; God is described as jealous, jealous to protect something special. Paul is provoked to feel jealous on God's behalf, sad that the people of Athens are lost. He is not there as a tourist, but as an ambassador for Christ.

What do we see when we look around us at our world? We see a culture that is being shaped by other forces: by obsessions with celebrity, by the me-culture of self-centredness and selfishness; we see a culture shaped by the desire for possessions and money, by the ambitions to get on and have more than our parents' generation; we see a culture shaped by image - 'how do I look?' matters more than 'what kind of

person am I?' We see a culture where lots of people's attitudes are shaped by Facebook or other social media and so much more besides; 'I need to be popular and my popularity is gauged by social media activity'. What do we see? We see people lost; they have wandered away from God and they don't know how to get back. They have a deep-seated need to be loved, but they don't know where next to turn when all these obsessions have let them down. How do we feel? Is there a feeling of sadness when we see people lost and helpless; are we provoked to care that people have rejected God? This is not a complaint that things are not what they used to be, but a deep concern that people are lost and that God is being replaced in their hearts and minds by these other obsessions?

What did Paul do? He told them about Jesus. "*He reasoned...*" (Acts 17:17ff) there are three places: he preached first in the synagogue, with a Jewish audience, in much same way as we saw him do in Thessalonica and Berea; secondly, he preached in the market-place, with anyone who happened to be passing; was he a kind of soap-box preacher? Obviously he attracted some kind of audience because that led to an invitation to the third, the Areopagus, the 'guardians of the city's religion, morals and education' (Stott), being invited to tell them this new teaching that he had been preaching in the market-place. In each of these places, Paul preached "*Jesus and the resurrection.*" (Acts 17:18) He took every opportunity that was open to him to preach, to tell people the stories of Jesus; he had the courage to take these opportunities when they came along. One opportunity led to another; being in the market-place gave him an opening into the place where the whole culture of Athens was debated and settled; these are the opinion-formers of the day and Paul has the chance to speak to them about Jesus! This is Paul the ambassador for Christ.

Paul told them about Jesus. In the market-place, he speaks about "*Jesus and the resurrection*" (Acts 7:18) clearly telling the story of Easter. In the Areopagus, he has a different way of leading people to Jesus. He begins with the altar to an unknown God, he talks about their culture, their poetry, what they know about life and what is important to them. He takes what they know and turns it around so that Paul can tell them about Jesus. Some people are critical of Paul's sermon in Athens because they say that Jesus is not there; but Jesus is there, right at the end: "*(God) has...*" (Acts 17:31) God is the giver of life; God gives us everything we need for life and living of it; God loves the world and God looks for people to love Him. At the centre of that relationship is the man He has appointed to save the world and later to judge the world, Jesus. This carefully constructed sermon leads the Areopagus to Jesus and brings them to see that the centre of the world, life and faith is Jesus; at the centre of the living God's dealings with His world is the man He has appointed, Jesus. Whether it is "*Jesus and the resurrection*" in the market-place or "*the man God has appointed*" in the Areopagus, the centre of the message is Jesus.

I was in a conversation a few years ago with someone who had been brought up in the life of the church but had been away and is now come back; he said to me that "before, we heard a lot about God, but you speak a lot more about Jesus" and I was able to explain that at the centre of our understanding of God stands Jesus. The message we have for the world is not an "unknown" God that we might feel for; God has revealed Himself and we know Him. The message is not about ourselves and how good our church is. The message is not about being a good person to get to heaven. The message is about Jesus; Jesus is the centre of the message that we have for the world. Jesus is the centre because Jesus is the Saviour who has died and is raised. Listen to the people you meet; listen to their concerns, to what bothers them, even to their obsessions; that has to be first. But then when they ask what you believe, tell them something about Jesus. It might be something simple; it might be something important; but tell them something about Jesus.

At our Stated Annual Meeting we were looking at the community for which we are Church, our parish area and how we can be church for this place. What do we need to be or to do in order to be the church doing God's mission in this place? Ian Gilmour quoted this piece from Athens about Paul being in the market-place and taking gospel to the market-place. We preach the gospel in the Church and it needs to be so; but where are the opportunities outside the church building to share Jesus with others? They occur spontaneously for us with our families and friends when we meet for coffee; they occur with our neighbours when we talk over the garden fence; they occur with the people we work beside around the water-cooler; they occur with our children and our grandchildren when they ask us hard questions or when we tell them Bible stories. These are opportunities for telling people about Jesus well-away from this building; the question is "are we ready to take them?"

We've said several times that Paul was in Athens, not as a tourist, but as an ambassador for Christ. I came across the notion of tour-bus Christians in something I was reading recently. "Tour-bus Christians drive comfortably through life as they gaze out of the window at others who are elbow-deep in the daily adventure of serving God and working among spiritually needy people." You get the idea: when you're in the tour bus you see, but not often take part in, life as you pass it by; this takes that idea and applies it to our part in the mission of God in the world. The writer talks about us being insulated from real-world activity, protected from the difficulties and struggles that other people face and that we're comfortable in the church that is settled and secure.

"The adventure comes when you tell the tour bus to stop and you jump off and say: "Use me to make a difference. Use me to impact a young person for you. Use me to solve someone's problem. Use me to soothe someone's pain. Use me to answer someone's prayer. Use me to feed someone who's hungry. Use me to rescue a child. Use me to bring someone to you. Use me to ease someone's loneliness. Use me to raise a godly family. Use me to deepen someone's faith. Use me to cheer someone on. Use me to help a broken person understand that she is precious in Your sight. Use me to touch lives in Your name. I don't want to just observe cathedrals through the bus window; I want to roll up my sleeves and build one! Lord, use me to build a living cathedral to Your glory." We can do this, every one of us, in some way or another, to be a blessing to someone, somewhere in Jesus' name this week.

This is the mission of God for us. Paul is the ambassador for Christ in the capital of culture of the ancient world; he told them the story of Jesus. He is there as an ambassador not a tourist. Are we 'tour-bus Christians', watching the world but letting other people do the work and take the strain? Or will we be involved, sleeves-rolled-up involved, in building a living cathedral, a people of faith, a people with Jesus at the centre? Will we tell people about Jesus? Will we be the Church in the market-place, outside these four walls? This is the mission of God for us.