Acts 17:22-34 Rogation Sunday 17th May 2020

Acts 17:22-34 New International Version - UK (NIVUK)

**22**Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: ‘People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. **23**For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship – and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

**24**‘The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. **25**And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. **26**From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. **27**God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. **28**“For in him we live and move and have our being.” As some of your own poets have said, “We are his offspring.”

**29**‘Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by human design and skill. **30**In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. **31**For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.’

**32**When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, ‘We want to hear you again on this subject.’ **33**At that, Paul left the Council. **34**Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

Today is Rogation Sunday, 17th May 2020, and if you were to say that to an average person on the street, you would see a blank, confused look staring back at you.

‘Rogation’ is not a word that we use these days. It comes from the Latin *rogare*, meaning “To Ask”. It is when the faithful processed through cornfields to pray for the preservation of the crops from mildew.

And when it comes to ‘Sunday’, many in the community would be happy to think that the special thing about a Sunday is that it is generally a day off.

A day off from the normal work we must do, and a day to do the things that we want to do. A day to lie in and have a lazy walk with the family or to catch up on some reading and good food, or to do some sporting activity. For most, Sunday is not a time to spend with our creator, to reflect on His goodness and grace, to re-calibrate our lives to His ways of living, and give thanks for the sacrificial death and resurrection of His Son for us.

But here on Rogation Sunday, it can be time to particularly acknowledge Him as creator of the world and everything in it, and so look to Him to protect the seeds sown by our farmers for a good crop.

In our reading from *Acts of the Apostles 17:22-34*, Luke has recorded St Paul’s encounter with the Athenian ruling group. If you turn in your Bible to just before our reading, verse 16, you will find Paul wandering around Athens and finding his spirit being provoked. He became greatly distressed through seeing so many alters to false gods.

And Paul, being Paul, became more and more outraged on behalf of God. You can imagine him stomping around saying: ‘It is God who should be honoured and worshipped, not all these gold and silver and stone figures that needed to be tendered and fed, served by people and have a great temple erected to make them seem even grander’.

And Paul, being Paul, takes that righteous rage to carefully reason with people in the synagogue and in the marketplaces about Jesus. And in doing that, he is noticed by the Athenian philosophers and brought to the Areopagus, the governing council of Athens, to explain this new, strange teaching.

Paul uses Old testament teaching and images to put forward his case, but he does it in a way that the Greeks can understand.

He starts where they are:

22“Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.

**23**For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship,

I found also an altar with this inscription,

‘**To the unknown god.’**

And then he goes on to explain his God given understanding to them, so that the *unknown god* may become the *known God* to them.

He tells them that this unknown god is the God who made the whole world, not just part of it but absolutely everything that is in it. This act of creation even includes those standing around Paul in judgement over his every word.

This all-encompassing act of creation is so complete that this God is therefore Lord of everything, not only the earth, but the heavens as well. He is too great to live in manmade temples, needing to be served by human hands as could be seen everywhere in Athens. You can perhaps imagine Paul sweeping his arm back to include the great construction of the Parthenon, just there above him, as he speaks to the council.

This creator God doesn’t need anything, its Him who gives to all humanity the spark of life and every breath and all that is needed for life. He is the one who has set how long we should live and where we should live, and His creation encourages His creatures to positively seek after Him. However, the truth is that without an explanation and someone to teach us, creation on its own will not lead us to a full understanding of the truth (Romans 1-3).

This is one of the reasons that the Lord sent His Son into this word and gave us the scriptures, so that we could truly learn what the Lord is like, and what is a right way of understanding and responding to Him.

St Paul goes further: this God is not far from each one of us. Paul directs their thinking to God’s omnipresence, His being present in all places at all times, the Lord’s hearing of our prayers and his complete knowledge of our hearts:

28“‘For we are indeed his offspring.’”

He argues that if we are God’s offspring through the one man, how can we debase him by limiting him through images formed by the art and imagination of man?

He is so much more than this. He is beyond containment.

And now Paul shifts his argument:

Up to now God has overlooked your ignorance, but now all people are going to be held accountable. We are to turn to Him now for our refuge from His coming judgement.

It is an extraordinary thought, that God himself is the one we are to seek sanctuary in.

And the nearness and certainty of that judgment has been demonstrated in the resurrection of the man who God appointed as judge.

He, Jesus Christ, is the proof that this will come to pass.

At this point, some of those educated men mocked, but others believed and joined Paul.

This very day many around us are seeking truth and understanding, as we go through the trials of Covid-19. The Bible is once again selling in record numbers. The Athenians were curious 2000 years ago and so are many today who are seeking understanding through the new media outlets of Zoom, Facebook and YouTube, as well as reading God’s word for themselves. As an aside, it would be good for Christians to be praying for all those seeking, to have receptive hearts and for them to come to a saving faith in Jesus.

St Paul didn’t have time in this encounter to go on to explain the role of Jesus, the Son of God to them, nor what repentance looked like. But we can see how some turned and believed.

This whole section has been about idols.

Very few people have a model of a god in their homes to worship, so we may wonder what this has to do with us.

But an idol is anything in our lives that we rely on more than we rely on God.

The simple test for this is to ask ourselves if we could do without it.

If we cannot, then we are holding it as something that is more important to us than the infinitely valuable relationship that we have with our heavenly Father God, who loves us. And that can’t be good!

These idols can be food or wealth or drink or freedom or …. Well the list goes on and on.

St Paul calls us to repent, to turn from these things so that we can fully know His love, and our lives can be more complete. We become more human as we become like Jesus, just as God created us to be.

And so, we return to Rogation Sunday:

A day to pray that planted crops will grow well, that farm animals thrive and the bounty of the land continues to support us, and all by the grace of God, the one who made the world and everything in it.

It is right to ask, to put our hope and trust in our living God, and this year our farmers are struggling more than ever.

But let us also pray that the inequalities, the hubris, the false reasoning and self-reliance of individuals, communities and even whole countries, is forever changed. Changed to a right and proper dependence on the ‘known’ God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

For He alone is worthy of worship and will never let us down. Amen.