A God Greater and Nearer
Acts 17:16-34

Now, every country has its top universities doesn't it? Here it's the EPFL or ETH Zurich. In the US its Cal-Tech or Harvard, and in the UK it's Cambridge or…. Hull. And if you want to find the leading thinkers in a particular field, you go to these kinds of places. You go to the university centres.

Well, we're looking at the book of Acts, and one of the things we're seeing is how the good news of Jesus impacted people from all the different strata of society. And today we're going to see the gospel go to the leading thinkers of the day, the cultural elite, because the apostle Paul has arrived in the city of Athens.

Now, of course when you and I think of Athens, we tend to think of its stunningly beautiful ruins like the Parthenon, lit up at night. But in Paul's day, even though it had lost some of its grandeur and political power, Athens remained, virtually, the intellectual or academic capital of the world.

And yet, what we're going to see is that for all the deep thinking, for all the philosophical intellectualism that was there, it didn't remove that inner longing for something more. And of course the same is true for us.

Acts 17:16-34

In Search of Something
Now when Paul arrived in Athens, all the tourist attractions that you and I might want to go and see were already there. In fact, they were in distinctly better condition than now, not least because the British hadn't run off with half their stuff. But as Paul's wandering around the city and seeing the sights, it's not the sights that catch his attention. Verse 16, 'His spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.'

So there were idols and statues of the gods everywhere. In fact, one writer says that it was easier to find a god in ancient Athens than it was to find a man. And Paul sees all these idols, and he has this strong, emotional reaction to it all. Now why is that? Because Paul was an intelligent man, in many ways he was an academic. So why the emotional response to these idols? Why could Paul not just be happy that the Athenians were at least believing in something, and 'each to their own, and this is their culture, and live and let live'?

Well, firstly, because of God. Paul has a passion for the honour of God's name and God's glory, and nothing else but God is worthy of our worship – and certainly not some stone idols.

But he also responds like this because of the people. To Paul, all these idols were not morally neutral, the whole set-up was leading people astray in something with eternal consequences. So Paul didn't see it all and just accept it, he saw it and it stirred something inside him.

Now, of course being in an academic city ourselves, we might be tempted to think, 'well, thank goodness we live in more enlightened times, no idols round these parts.' But that is far from the truth, isn't it? And I don't just mean the gods

of other religions. After all, consider what an idol is? Not just a stone carving of a god, but a modern day, 21st century idol.

An idol is anything that fulfils the role of God in someone's life. Anything that becomes an ultimate thing in your life. Something that gives you your reason for being, or that you look to make you happy, that you get your sense of significance and worth from, something that you put your trust in, or to use a theological word, something you worship, by making sacrifices for. Not animal sacrifices, but you sacrifice your time, money, health, or even family for.

And so, at least in the West, the idols of our day aren't stone ones. They're more likely to be career, or money, or sport, or science, or sex, or fame, or even family and marriage. As someone else has said, an idol can be any good thing that becomes a god thing, an ultimate thing, in your life. And so whilst we don't build statues to them, we certainly build altars to them in our hearts, they take the God-spot, and we work and sacrifice and put our hope in these things: 'This is going to do it for me.'

And Paul's distress is because he knows, what many of us may have learnt by experience, that idols can never give you what you are really looking for, that search for something more in life. They will always sell you short.

So, what does Paul do? Well, interestingly, he doesn't respond as people often do when they don't like what they see happening in society. He doesn't withdraw into a Christian ghetto, but neither does he get angry with the people, or write a withering blog article complaining about the state of society. Instead he gets in amongst them, and engages with the culture around him, to explain the gospel to them in ways that they will understand. Verse 17, 'So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons' – so that was like taking your argument to those who are already favourable to your position – 'and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.'

Now, of course, here in Switzerland, when we hear 'marketplace' we think of people selling cheese from their market stalls, or vignerons selling their wine, or butchers selling outrageously priced sausages that you have to take out a mortgage to buy. But in these ancient cities the marketplace was the cultural, political, intellectual, economic centre of the city. It's like Paul going onto campus, or into the board-room of a company, and taking the gospel to where these thinkers and movers are.

And in that Paul is a great model to those of us here who are Christians, whether it's in school, on campus or in business. Because he doesn't withdraw but neither does he adopt the pose of a cultural warrior. He knows these idols can never satisfy these guys, worse he knows they are missing the real deal, and so he goes to them, and engages with them, to show them why Christ is what they are really searching for. And that should be an encouragement to us to do the same.

And as he does so, he encounters two groups of people, the Epicurean and the Stoic philosophers. Now, unless you are a philosopher type, those names alone

will make you think these guys inhabited a different universe to you, but you'd be surprised. And if you're not yet a Christian, you might even recognise yourself amongst them. You see, the Epicureans were the atheists and the agnostics of their day. These guys had little or no time for God or the gods. They weren't taken in by all the fantastic stories of what the Greek gods got up to. And the gods either didn't exist, or if they did they were so distant that they had no bearing on life. And there was no such thing as life after death, and life itself was just a meaningless event of chance. But, just like the rest of us, they still had to face the pain and sufferings of life, and so they handled this by pursuing pleasure. Whatever gives you pleasure, whatever makes you feel good, that's what you should pursue, live life for now. Which sounds pretty familiar, doesn't it?

But the Stoics were at the other end. If the Epicurians were the relativists, and if it feels good and gives you pleasure, do it, the Stoics emphasized duty, and doing the right thing. They believed in a supreme God, but was the world soul, God was in everything. And they believed in fate, and to cope with the suffering and pain of life, you should resign yourself to fate, and not fight it, and endure suffering, and do your duty, however painful it might be; that you should find within yourself all the strength and all the resources to handle life. And of course, plenty of people still try to live by some variation 'you've got to do your duty in life' kind of philosophy today.

Now Luke says in v18 that Paul was 'preaching Jesus and the resurrection' to them. But in reaction these philosophers call Paul a 'babbler', literally 'a seed-picker'. And that was a pretty derogatory term. It was used of a bird which went around picking up seeds. And it was used as a term for someone who picked up scraps of knowledge here and there and tried to pass them off as his own. In other words, they're saying, 'this birdbrain, talking about the resurrection of some guy, is not our intellectual equal, he doesn't even understand the stuff he's talking about.' So pretty insulting stuff.

But despite being insulted, Paul doesn't withdraw, or change his tone to try and match their nastiness or cynicism. In fact, he catches their interest enough to get an invitation to present his ideas before the Areopagus. Now the Areopagus was the supreme council of Athens: so if Athens was like the EPFL and Harvard and Cambridge rolled into one, the Areopagus was the cream of each institution.

And look what Paul does. He homes in on the fact that for all their philosophy, for all their fine arguments about the existence of God and the meaning of life, deep down they all knew, as we all know, that there is a God and that they needed him. Verse 22, 'Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.'

So do you see what he's doing? He's spotted that they have this nagging doubt that they haven't got things sorted, that they haven't got this god-thing nailed; that for all their idols there might just be something else, 'what if I'm missing the right one?' And the very fact that they are asking that question tells you, they

know they haven't yet found what they're searching for. They know there's something missing. It's that God shaped hole that's in every one of us; the hole that we try and fill with all these idols, ancient and modern, to answer that search for more.

And very graciously, Paul goes for that sense of need. And in doing so he tells them two things about God.

God is Greater than you Think

Now, one reason why the Epicurean philosophers dismissed the ancient gods was because they were so petty, they were self-serving, they were always getting into fights with one another, or sleeping with one another, and they were obviously fantasy tales. So they dismissed it all as a bad lot. On the other hand, the Stoics saw God-in-everything. And those two positions, to dismiss the whole idea of God as unworthy of us, or to have woolly, fluffy ideas about God, are two reasons why people, maybe even some of you, still reject God.

And so instead Paul gives them a vision of a God who is way bigger and greater than they, or we, could have imagined. Verse 24, 'The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man.' So, rather than God being in everything, He is the Creator of everything. Rather than God being some small minded deity in a temple who you rightly reject, he is the transcendent God over all.

Then he tells them something stunning, that God does not need them, that you're not doing God a favour by worshipping him: v25, 'nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.'

You see, why would you worship a god who needs you? And so Paul tells them, God *doesn't* need you, he doesn't need your sacrifices, your incense, your temples. It is *you* who *need* him. You are dependent on him for every breath. And so the gospel, the good news, is bad news for the proud and those who think they can live life in their own strength, or that they're doing God a favour by coming, but it's good news for the weak, for those who know they can never do enough to serve God or impress him. Instead, the gospel tells us that God delights to serve us.

And that is the second thing Paul tells them about God. That not only is he greater than you think, he is also nearer that you think.

God is Nearer Than you Think

You see Paul tells them that whilst God is the supreme Lord, who determines where and when everyone lives, he has also put this desire to find him in our hearts. So this quest for the spiritual, or the meaning of life, all comes from him. Verse 27, 'that they should seek God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each of us.' So for all God's greatness, for all his might, for all how different he is from idols people surround themselves with, God is near and can be found.

And yet, when Paul says we can feel our way towards him, he uses a word that could also be translated 'grope our way to him'. Like someone groping around in the dark. And there's a doubt there. It's as if we're blind, groping in the dark for something that we know instinctively is there, but we don't really know what we're looking for. God is just an arm's reach away, but left to ourselves there seems no guarantee we'll find him.

And these idols were an attempt by the people to reach out to God. But Paul shows them how wrong they had got it. And he does that by quoting from two of their own poets. It's as if he's saying, 'hey listen to what your own poets are saying, and if they're right, and we are God's children, then we can learn something of what God is like by looking at ourselves. So God cannot be a stone idol. He must be a living spirit, he must be capable of relationship, he must understand the complexities and the difficulties of life, he must know what it is to suffer and inhabit a world like ours. He's not going to be a lump of stone.'

So given that God is greater than we could imagine, and nearer than we could ever hope, but we're stumbling in the dark, what should these intellectuals in Athens, what should you and I do? Verse 30, 'The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.' In other words, we should turn to God, and not just to become a bit more spiritual and have a bit of God in our lives, but because judgment is coming. Verse 31, 'because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness.' God is greater than you think, and nearer than you could have hoped. But that nearness also means he knows us: he knows what we are like, and because he is a just and holy God, and not like these petty idols, he will, one day, address the issue of sin.

But hang on! If these Athenians and you and I are like men stumbling around in a dark room, trying to find something we know is there, but need help to find, and now we face judgment for not finding it, what are we supposed to do? Don't we need God to come and find us?

The Man and His Resurrection

And what Paul says is that God has done just that. God has entrusted the judgment to come, v31, to 'a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.' So God came as a man, Jesus, to turn on the light, and show us the way out, to show us what God is really like. And he does that, not by dwelling in a temple and being served, but by entering our world and serving, and giving his life in our place at the cross, for our sin, to deal with the very issue in our lives that deserves God's judgment.

You see, not only is God greater than we could imagine, and nearer than we could ever hope, he has come so near as to give his life to save us.

But of course, Christ could just be one among many, couldn't he? That's what these Epicurean and Stoic philosophers could say, it's what some would say today. 'Ok, just add him to the list, Zeus and Mercury and the Unknown God and now Jesus, sure he can have his place in the pantheon of gods.'

But not according to Paul. You see, if Jesus has been raised from the dead, then everything changes. It means that he is not just one among many. He is the One. And the resurrection means that not every way is right. But rather there *is* one way, that *is* right, and it's Christ.

And that's why when Paul mentions the resurrection Luke writes, v32, 'Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked.' Because they know, as well as anyone else, the life-changing, world-shattering implications for them and for all of us, if it's true that God really has raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead.

But listen, if he has been raised from the dead, then any amount of mocking is worth it to get that message out. And if as Christians we have the courage to follow in Paul's footsteps, and not withdraw, and not throw grenades from the sidelines, but engage with our culture, and listen to what people are saying, and then take the gospel to them in ways that speak to this underlying need, this search for something, if you do that at school, or on campus, or in the office, you will get mocked. But that doesn't make it wrong. And when you know that Jesus was mocked to save you, you'll take the mocking. Because the resurrection proves that Christ, and not his mockers, was right.

And not everybody mocked, and not everyone will mock. Luke tells us others believed. And that was just the start, and within a few generations, the Greek world and the Roman Empire had been won for the gospel. Why? Because idols and philosophies can never fill this hole, they cannot satisfy this searching. But Christ can.