The Gospel to the Intellectual
Acts 17:16-33

As we start our life here, we're finishing our series on Christ for the City and Campus. And last week we looked at the religious person - and what the gospel has to say to them. Today, I want us to consider the more intellectual type of person, the type of person for whom the life of the mind matters. And maybe you're one of them. Well what does the gospel have to say to them, or to you?

Because if I were to ask you, 'Who is Christianity for?' What would you reply? You might say, 'for everyone', but if you're not yet a Christian you might not be so sure.

After all, the second century Greek philosopher Celsus, a fierce critic of Christianity, said that Christianity was for 'the foolish, the dishonourable and stupid… slaves, women and little children.' That's who Christianity's for.

Is he right? Is it just for the stupid? Well, at first glance you might think he's on to something. Because, as one scholar has pointed out, Greeks would have liked a philosopher king, and the Romans a noble statesman - but Jesus came as a carpenter. Hardly the role of a public intellectual.

And writing to people steeped in Greek culture, Paul says, 'Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?'… Rather, 'It pleased God through *the folly* of what we preach to save those who believe' (1 Cor 1:20-21). Doesn't that indicate an anti-intellectual bias in Christianity?

Except in the passage we had read to us, Paul's in Athens, the cultural, intellectual capital of the Greco-Roman world; the Oxford, Cambridge, Yale and Harvard, EPFL and Unil of its day and he doesn't just take the gospel to the workers in the market place, the *a-gor-a*, but to philosophers in the *areopagus*. Why?

Well, that's what we're going to look at: - firstly, it doesn't matter how many degrees you have, we all worship something, secondly, there's a problem with worship, thirdly, there's only one worthy of worship.

We all Worship
Now, apparently, in New Zealand, there are more sheep than people. Well, according to historians, in Athens, if you counted up all the statues, in all the temples, in all the shrines, it almost certainly had idols than people.

Verse 16: 'While Paul was waiting for them at Athens… he saw that the city *was full* of idols.' And the word Luke uses for 'full' has the sense of being *under*. So as Paul walks around the city, he sees a city drowning, smothered by, and submerged under idols.

It's why when he addresses the *Areopagus*, he starts by saying, v22, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way *you are very religious*." And he's talking to the intellectuals of the day.

Now, you might think, 'yeah but that was then and now's now, and now intelligent people have left religion behind.'

Have we? Because if you have an ounce of sense you've got to admit that we're all believers in something. Because to say 'There is no God,' which you can't prove, or 'one day science or technology will give us the answers', or 'if science can't prove it, it's not real', is to believe something you can't prove in the lab. Or to start talking about meaning in life, or human rights, or 'being on the right, or

wrong side of history' is to admit you've got a world view that cannot be empirically proven. Which means you're basing your life on something you take to be true by faith. We all do. You can't avoid it.

But does that make you a worshipper? Well, the American philosopher James KA Smith would argue 'yes.' Because in his book, *You Are What You Love,* he spells out how since Descarte's, "I think, therefore I am" humanity has been reduced to being brains on sticks, that we're just thinking things. But as Smith points out, the problem is there's this gap between what you *think* and *know* and what you *do*. Because you can know something's the right thing to do, but it doesn't mean you do it. Why not? Or you can know something's bad for you, but you still eat it. Why? Or, as he argues, " you say 'we are what we know', but why do you take the trouble to learn and know anything? Because you *want* to. You *desire* to."

So Smith argues, 'what if you're not just a thinking thing?' What if you're more than a brain on a stick? What if you're not just a thinker, or even just a believer, what if you're also a wanter, a desirer, a lover - a worshipper. Someone who's always looking for something to give them that sense of what Charles Taylor, the Canadian philosopher calls, 'fullness.'

It's why the American writer, David Foster Wallace, who was not a Christian, said: 'In the day-to day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship.' Because it's that thing that we're looking to for fullness, that thing we're sacrificing for to get, that thing we're trusting to give us what we want in life, that's the thing we're worshipping.

And sure, you don't erect a stone statue to it, but we're just as much worshipping power, or pleasure, or freedom, or success, or sex, or family, or career, as any citizen of Athens ever did.

So, let me ask you, what is it for you? What are you sacrificing for - maybe even sacrificing your health or your family for? What is it you want and love above everything else? What can't you do without? What if you lost it life would crumble? Well, there's your god.

Or if Paul could walk onto campus, or into your business, or see inside your heart, what would he see that would make him go: 'I can see you are very religious'? Because you're looking to this idol just as much as the Athenians did to theirs.

Ok, but did you notice what it was that made Paul say that? Because it was one idol in particular. Verse 23, "for as I passed long and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: 'To the unknown god.'"

Now was that a result of a 1st Century religious risk assessment? 'We've got all these altars to all these gods, but what if we're missing one?' And it's that nagging doubt that Paul homes in on, because he says, 'you are surrounded by idols, but deep down you know you're missing something. You know there's a God out there, a God worthy of worship. But you also know you don't know him.'

And if you're not yet a Christian, I want to say that is also true for you, however much you might protest.

Let me give you an example. One of my daughters studied Geography at uni. And during one lecture her professor spoke about cultural imperialism and how wrong it is for us in the West to impose our culture on others. Because it's not right to say, 'I'm right and you're wrong.' Now, apart from the irony of saying it's not right to say I'm right and you're wrong, because what is that except you imposing your worldview

on me, it's that one of my daughter's friends, who's not a Christian, put her hand up and said, 'but what about female genital mutilation?' 'Ah that's different' said the professor - who's a woman. 'Why's it different?' 'Well it just is.' 'But you just said we shouldn't impose our cultural values on others, so how can we say it's wrong.' 'I can't tell you why it's wrong, it just is wrong.'

What has that professor just done? She's erected an altar to an unknown God. She knows deep down that there are such things as moral absolutes, things that are universally right and wrong for all people, in all places, at all times. But how can she say that unless there's a universal law from a universal lawgiver? And the same goes for us. The moment we say it's wrong for the rich to oppress the poor, or the strong the weak - we're saying there is a law we are all accountable to. But how can that be without a God we must obey? So deep down we know he's there, however much we might not want to admit it.

So, you're not just a brain on a stick. We all worship something and we all have this deep inner sense of God, and our obligation to him.

But what if instead of worshipping him you worship a substitute?

The Problem with Worship
Look at Paul's reaction to what he sees: v16: 'His spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.'

And that word provoked is the word we get *paroxysm* from. The same word for someone having a seizure. So is Luke saying, 'Paul saw all these idols *and he had a fit*'?

No. But he was clearly disturbed him, wasn't he? Because it's also the same word used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament for when God was provoked to anger with Israel. And provoked by what? Their idolatry.

So this isn't Paul feeling emotional pain for the Athenians are what they're missing out on. This is Paul experiencing a deep, gut level reaction for the honour of God's name.

Now, if you've seen the film *Mozart*, you've seen an example of how self-destructive jealousy can be, haven't you? Because Salieri sees how much better a musician Mozart is to him, and he is eaten up by it. So jealousy is bad. But what if I started bringing another woman home, and in front of Su started showing affection for her? Wouldn't Su be right to be jealous? Because something that's rightfully hers - my affection and loyalty - is being taken by another.

And we would say to Salieri, 'hey, Antonio, this jealousy's destroying you, you need to stop it.' But no one in their right mind would say that to Su, would they? Wouldn't she be right to be disturbed?

And as he walks the streets of Athens, it's that right kind of jealousy Paul feels - for the love and adoration that should be God's but instead is being poured out on statues.

So let me ask you, if you're a Christian, have you ever felt that? When you pray, 'Our Father in heaven, *hallowed* be your name' - do you mean it? Do you feel it? As you look at the world and what people give their lives to, do you have that same gut level reaction? Because that's what spurs Paul to action.

Verse 17, '*So* he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.' He's not a tourist, is he? He doesn't just visit the sites, and listen to the debates, but stay emotionally detached. And neither does he feel provoked but then retreat in indignation at the state of contemporary culture.

What does he do? He engages. In fact, the word Luke uses to describe Paul *reasoning* with those he met, is the word we get *dialoging* from. So whether it's in the synagogue, with people who are like him, or in the marketplace - the place of business and politics, he enters their world and he listens and he discusses, and he does it because he wants to share the gospel with them in ways they'll get.

And we should too. But lest we get misty eyed about doing it, look at the Athenians' response: Verse 18, 'Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, "What does this babbler wish to say?"'

And I know this is hopelessly basic, but the Epicureans were the YOLO, you only live once, so live it to the full type of people. And this life is it, so don't worry, be happy - and if it feels good, do it. But the Stoics were the 'no! You need to live a virtuous, upright kind of life, and it's precisely all this feeling good or bad that's the problem.' So you've got the moralists and the relativists.

But they're united in their attitude to Paul: *'This babbler.'*

It's the word for 'seed picker' - a bird who pecks away at seed on the ground. So he's a bird-brain, an intellectual lightweight, picking at stuff he doesn't understand. But it was also used as an insult to describe teachers who had no original material of their own, who just recycled others work and claimed it as their own. So he's a plagiarist, a fraud, an amateur, and a fool.

Why? Verse18, because 'He was preaching Jesus *and the resurrection*.'

But was he a fool? You see, even Paul's most severe critics today would agree he has left an indelible mark on Western culture, a man of incredible intellect.

So why label him a fool? Well, you could say it's just that they haven't got to know him yet. But there's more than that going on, isn't there? Because don't their insults give just a hint of intellectual pride and arrogance?

And think about it? Isn't that precisely one of the problems of worshipping the wrong thing? That if what you worship, what you most value and give the place of ultimate love and allegiance to in your heart, doesn't humble you, it'll make you proud.

Listen again to David Foster Wallace: 'There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of God or spiritual-type thing to worship — be it J.C. or Allah, be it Yahweh or the Wiccan mother-goddess or the Four Noble Truths… is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things — if they are where you tap real meaning in life — then you will never have enough. Never feel you have enough… Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you… Worship power — you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay. [Or, and here's the punch for us] *Worship your intellect, being seen as smart* — you

will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.' Or, we might add, you'll always be putting others down, to make you feel more secure.

So, why is worship a problem? - because if there is a God, and your sense of moral obligation tells you there is, and you're not worshipping him - then you're robbing him of what's rightly his. But also, because if you worship the wrong thing - and you will worship something - it will corrupt you.

Great, but why worship Paul's God, the God of the Bible, and not Allah, or the Wiccan mother goddess of Foster Wallace?

The Only One Worthy of Worship

And some of these philosophers are sufficiently intrigued to invite Paul to speak before the intellectual centre of Athens: v19-20: 'And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears."'

And read what Paul says there and what's clear is that he wants them to see the greatness of God, and in comparison the smallness of their idols.

Look how he does it. Firstly, he describes seeing that altar to the unknown God. And then he says, v23, 'What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.' In other words, your own culture, your own practises testify against you - you know there's a God, but you also know you don't know him. Just as our western liberal values, which have no foundation apart from belief in God, testify against us.

But secondly, v24, 'The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man.' Because this is the God who made all things, so isn't it foolish to think he lives in temples made by the hands he created?

Thirdly, God didn't just make everything, he sustains everything: 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.' So, you give all these sacrifices of food to your idols, because they're needy and thirsty, but the one true God gives you everything you have - including your breath. He does not depend on you, you depend on him.

Fourthly, he's sovereign over all: v26, 'And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling places." So why are you here this morning? Because God wanted you here. Why are you living in Lausanne? Because that is where God has placed you.

Now what if you knew that the God of the universe was intimately involved in the smallest details of your life? Wouldn't that give you a deep sense of peace and security? Because you'd know that whatever happens to you, you are safe in his hands. Safe, that is, provided he's good. But how would you know he's good without knowing him?

Well, that's the fifth thing Paul tells them: 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 one of us.' In other words, God can be known and he wants you to know him.

So that desire you have to experience fullness of life, or that longing for justice, or that nagging sense of homelessness, or those altars you erect to an unknown God, or that sense that in a vast universe you are

somehow significant - tells you, your desire for God is hardwired into you. And all those things are like voices whispering in your heart: 'he's there, so seek him, find him.' And you may feel far from him, but he is not far from you, Paul says You may not know him, but he intimately knows you.

And that sense of the divine isn't just in your hearts, Paul says, it's in your literature. And he quotes two of their own writers to show them, look 'Your own culture tells you, you are made by God, so why worship idols?' I mean, you're being inconsistent even by your own culture.

But wouldn't he say the same to you, if you're not yet a Christian? Because again, when we make claims for universal human rights, or justice, or that some things are right and others wrong, aren't we also living inconsistent lives?, because all those things depend on a God, who we then deny.

But then Paul comes full circle. He started with their altar to the God they don't know. And he finishes, v30, by saying 'the times of ignorance God overlooked' but now, those days are over. And he calls them to repent, v31, 'Because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man who he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

But did you notice the reaction when he again mentions the resurrection? Verse 32, 'Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead some mocked.' And that good old intellectual pride kicks in again. But is it just pride? I mean, isn't it self-evident that when someone's dead, they're dead.'

Sure. But don't they think Paul knows that? So wouldn't a wiser and more rational approach be to ask him - 'why do you say that? Why do you claim something that we all know is impossible?' But have they examined the evidence? Have they approached this dispassionately, as genuine seekers of the truth? Or are they assuming they already know? But doesn't that altar testify that they don't know everything about God?

And what about you, if you're not yet a Christian? Have you investigated and examined the evidence for the resurrection?

You see, the irony here is that these intellectuals dismiss Paul as a bird-brain. But within a few hundred years, virtually every intellectual was persuaded of the resurrection. So if you're going to worship something, and you are, wouldn't it be better to examine the evidence for the one who won't corrupt you, the only one infinitely great enough to be worthy of your worship?

And for those of us who are Christians, why should we risk being mocked as we seek to dialogue with and enter the world of others, like Paul did? Because Christ entered our world and he didn't just risk, and he wasn't just mocked for you. And you are loved by him.

So let's go out into the world because we know him, and we care for the honour of his name - and we want others to know him too. Because he is great and he is good.