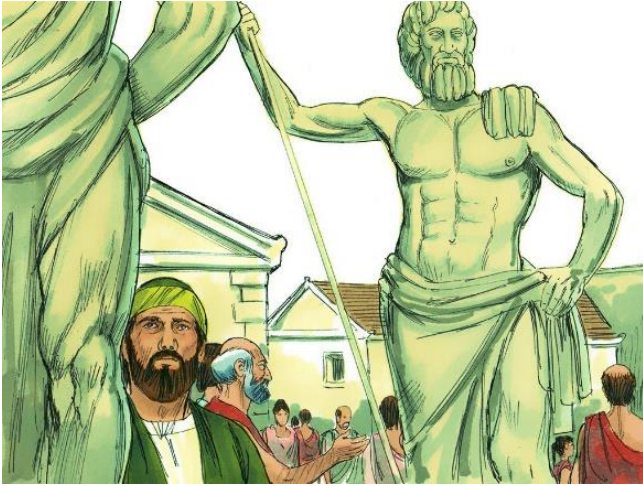


High St Uniting Church Frankston

Tailoring the message Acts 17:22 – 31



The legend goes:

Once upon a time in Athens there was a terrible plague and the people, and the priests, tried to win the favour of the gods to end it. Nothing that they did brought an end to the suffering. Then, one of the wise men of the city had a plan. He brought a flock of sheep to the top of Mars Hill – the political and legal centre – and released them. He said that wherever the sheep stopped to graze, an alter would be set up and a sheep sacrificed to “The Unknown God”. This course of action seemed to be successful, as

the plague came to an end. In honour of this, a statue was erected with the inscription TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.

Whether that is the origin of the idol that Paul refers to in preaching to the Athenians, or whether Paul is correct in referring to a 'religiosity' that takes no chances and avoids offending a god who is not known, Paul takes the opportunity to use this strange idol as a “way in” to preaching Jesus. When he is taken to the top of that same Mars Hill – the Areopagus – he uses the existence of that statue as a bridge, or point of connection, to get people’s attention and enable the message of God’s way in Jesus to find some connection.

As we read through Paul’s story in Acts, Paul, having heard the message of God to move out of Asia into Europe, starting at Philippi, he continues west. Having been chased out of both Thessalonica and Berea, he proceeds to Athens to wait for his friends to catch up before going on to the then more important city of Corinth. Paul’s usual practice in a new city was to start in the synagogue, but Luke tells us that in Athens he also goes out into the streets to talk to whoever will listen. And being Athens, the centre of philosophy, he gets involved in discussions and arguments with some of the city’s philosophers, the Epicureans, and the Stoics. Despite some confusion, the Athenians are genuinely curious and so take Paul to their centre of religious and civic authority to have him heard officially. Here, on Mars Hill, he makes his speech. To some, this speech is a masterpiece of missionary preaching, to others this speech is problematic.

Many criticise this speech because it doesn't name Jesus, doesn't talk about the cross, doesn't mention sin, and doesn't seek conversion or baptism. They see this as a failure of evangelism, an example of going off script to appeal to the popular idea. They point to verse 21, “Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new”, and say, Paul got lost in appealing to the 'philosophical collectors' and failed to preach the gospel. A failure demonstrated by the limited response. I think this is a misunderstanding. After all, if this was such a failure, why did Luke preserve the story? This speech isn't a clumsy attempt at being trendy and philosophical but a great example of using the cultural context to connect with people and enable the gospel to be preached. There may not be a great crowd of converts at the end but there are some, and there are others who want to hear more. Here is one of the first examples of Paul’s avowed

desire to be 'all things to all men in order to win them to Christ.' Paul in effect says, "You Athenians are so superstitious you even put up an idol to an unknown god to cover all the possibilities. Let me tell you about the one true God, who is unknown to you, but is known to us. This is the God who made the heavens and the earth, created all the nations and desires to be in union with all people; a desire proven by raising Jesus from the dead." Paul took what he saw around him and what he knew of Greek culture, he even quotes Greek philosophers and poets, and used it to argue for Jesus.

Paul created a point of connection to enable the gospel to be preached. Instead of berating the Athenians for being pagans he found a way to say, 'You've got a bit of the truth and here's the rest.' Yes, there is little of what we would call the gospel in this speech, but this is a starting point, a way into the religious milieu of Athens. In a philosophical atmosphere of Epicureans on one hand, saying that the gods are either not real or not interested, so live life as happily as you can, and the Stoics on the other, saying that the way to live is to just accept your fate, Paul preaches the real, involved Creator God who has demonstrated a way that is moral and beyond fate, by raising Jesus from the grave. That some joined him and became believers demonstrates that this message had the power to connect. There may be more of what we call the gospel in other speeches by Paul, but they are also different from each other depending on the audience. There is not a 'one size fits all' Gospel script that is to be followed in every situation and to every audience.

We can join Paul in being deeply distressed with the state of our culture; drug use, materialism, individualism, uncontrolled sexuality and atheism. But let us also join Paul in seeing the underlying needs and yearnings and tailor our messages to reach out to those needs.

- those caught in drugs, alcohol or other addictions are possibly feeling hopeless. A message that offers a personal account of the hope that we have, rather than a stern call to conversion maybe the connecting point to bring the gospel alive to that person.

- those obsessed with youth, make-up and surgical enhancement are possibly afraid of death. A message about life and resurrection, rather than the cross might be the connecting point.

- those obsessed with military action, espionage and retribution are possibly seeking security. A message about the caring God whose love endures forever, rather than righteousness and sin, might be a connecting point.

There is a Christian teaching program called 6640, 66 books, 40 authors, one message from beyond time. However, the reality is, the one God we worship, through the one Lord Jesus Christ, is made known to us in a Bible with 66 different books containing hundreds of stories and metaphors and images. We have a wonderful resource of ways to make the gospel known, relevant and understandable to different people in different situations. Not a different gospel or a watered-down gospel, but the gospel in other words and different facets, addressing need and thirst, and spoken with love.