

Acts 17:13-34 Athens – Contextualisation in evangelism

Sunday, 19th June, 2011

In 632 BC Megacles – the king of Athens went to war against a man called Cylon who was trying to take over the throne. Megacles won the battle and surrounded Cylon's followers in a temple on Mars Hill – the holiest place in Athens and then told them that if they surrendered their lives would be spared.

They surrendered – and then he ordered that Cylon and all his followers be killed, which happened.

This war crime was seen as a terrible stain on Megacles' family and on the city of Athens.

Some time later plague broke out in Athens. Everyone believed that it was the gods' judgement for the crime they had committed and so, as was the custom, the city made sacrifices to the gods to ask for forgiveness and purification.

But the plague went on and got worse, so the city's leaders went to the pagan oracles (prophets) to ask what they should do.

The oracles said they couldn't think of anything else to do – they had run out of gods to sacrifice to and had no more ideas.

But they did know of one man who could help. He was called Epimenides of Crete – a foreigner. They said if they asked him, he would have the answer.

So they set off to Crete with lots of treasure to offer him if he would come back to Athens to help them.

When they met him he refused to take any payment but said that if they promised friendship between Athens and Crete, then he would help.

He arrived in Athens to find that the plague was getting worse and worse, so he went to Mars Hill – near the site of the Acropolis (although it hadn't been built at the time) and spoke to the Athenian leaders and told them his plan.

He said that the plague was God's judgement on them, but they hadn't appealed to the correct god.

So they needed to humble themselves and admit that they didn't know this God, rather than guessing.

He also said that if the God was powerful enough and gracious enough to heal their city, He would also be able to forgive their ignorance.

So his plan was this; they would starve a flock of sheep overnight and then, the following morning, would let them go on the grassy slopes of Mars Hill. Any sheep that ate the grass, they would let go, but any that laid down and didn't eat, they would count as ones that the Unknown God had chosen.

No-one expected hungry sheep to lie down without eating, but some did. And they built altars on each spot where a sheep had laid down and then sacrificed those sheep on the altars.

Within the day the plague started reducing and within a few days it had completely finished.

The Athenians honoured Epimenides and built statues to him.

(from 'The lives of eminent philosophers' by Diogenes Laertius – quoted by Don Richardson in 'Eternity in their hearts')

600 years later, Paul and his companions were travelling around the Mediterranean as we have been hearing about in the Book of Acts.

Last week Jon preached about Paul's visit to Thessalonica and Berea. I want to take up the story of what happened next.

When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, they went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up. The brothers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea. The men who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.

Athens was a very famous city where there were lots of philosophers – Plato, Aristotle and others. It was famous for being the place in the world where the great intellectuals gathered – all the world's cleverest men, to debate and gain knowledge – a bit like a top university like Oxford or Cambridge (or BCU!) but more so.

And as well as gathering knowledge, they also 'gathered' religions; when a traveller came from a different part of the world, they would find out about their local gods and adopt them too – building altars or temples and including them in their long list of gods.

One visitor said that taking an idol to Athens was like taking rocks to a quarry.

And that's what Paul found:

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus (that is, the meeting on Mars Hill), where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

If you can imagine the scene, this was Paul standing in front of the 'cleverest' people in the world on the 'biggest stage' he had been on – this was like facing a big panel of Stephen Hawking and Richard Dawkins and lots of university professors and leaders of other faiths and philosophers – all highly trained in arguing and all itching to jump in if you used a wrong word or said anything that wasn't a logical argument!

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 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. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

"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 hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for

them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

(These are quotes from Epimenides and another very popular Greek poet called Aratus)

"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 man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 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 all men by raising him from the dead."

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." At that, Paul left the Council. A few men 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. (Acts 17:13-34)

In my life and in the life of the Crown I can't say how important this passage has been.

This is an amazing model of how Paul presented the Gospel across cultures with great awareness and skill and wisdom.

And while many of us are familiar with the story and maybe read it as if the words just fell out, if we look at it, what we find is it was brilliantly and even daringly aimed at winning the people listening.

I'm not a fisherman, but I know that there is a lot of skill in catching fish; you don't just put any maggot on a hook and throw it in the water; you have to get the bait and colour just right and try to catch certain fish.

Here, Paul shows great skill and gifting in catching cross-cultural fish.

Let me explain how and from that, what we can learn as we build a church for the nations of Birmingham.

1. Paul knew the people he was trying to reach

Paul had been brought up as a Jew and trained as a Rabbi, and many Jews separated themselves from the cultures around them. In fact, as a Jew Paul would have been taught that the other nations – the Gentiles were no better than dogs – an offence to God with their worship of idols.

But Paul was different. Clearly he had put the effort into learning about different cultures, rather than just reading the books a Rabbi or a Christian should read. If he had had a book shelf it would have been full of all kinds of books from different cultures, looking at famous writers from around the known world and he was familiar with different philosophies and religions.

He was familiar with Epimenides because in this passage he quotes him, and also later on when he is writing to Titus who has been sent to Crete:

Even one of their own prophets has said, “Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.” This testimony is true. Therefore, rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith (Titus 1:12-13)

And interestingly, Paul didn't just think that everything non-Christian or non-Jewish was bad or evil; he addresses Epimenides as a prophet (the same term as is used for NT and OT prophets) – and so honours him, although he was not a Jew or a follower of Jesus.

He shows here that he was able to respect and be positive about some parts of the cultures around him, but without compromising his Christian belief.

Other cultures weren't to be hated or feared; but rather they were people, made in God's Image, with a longing for Eternity in their hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11) although Sin has spoiled this and they do not know or understand God.

For us in Birmingham, if we are to have a similar attitude to Paul, it means that we need to push through any prejudice and befriend people different to ourselves – get to know the people groups around us.

2. Paul 'aimed' the Gospel at the people he was trying to reach

The technical word that is used for this is that he 'contextualised' the Gospel – he made it as relevant to the people he was speaking to as possible – without watering it down.

He did this throughout the New Testament if you read it carefully, using examples and pictures and stories that his readers would easily understand.

But to give a couple of examples from his encounter with the Athenians:

1. He used the Greek word "Theos" for God. This wasn't a word the Jews would have used as it came from a pagan religion, but the word Theos meant the same – God, and helped the Athenians understand this wasn't just Paul bringing another 'local' god to them; this was *The* God.
2. Paul used the type of speech the Greeks would have understood. He built an argument based on logic and rhetoric – in the Greek style as well as the Greek language.

And he did it very well! The Greeks would have been trained to jump in with a counter-argument if there had been a gap in the logic of the argument. But not only did he keep their attention for some time, he was also able to point out their ignorance in a way that didn't offend them!

3. As I have mentioned, he knew about and had probably studied their poets and history.

Why was this possible?

3. Paul knew that Jesus is Lord of all the Earth

If God was just a Jewish, local god of the Middle East, then He would mean nothing to the sophisticated Greeks in Athens and there would be no connection to be made between their culture and the god of the Bible.

But if God is really God – the Creator of all things – the Maker of all mankind, then His 'fingerprints'; His image must be in every culture.

And Paul knew that our God is not just a local god!

“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 hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us (v.24-27)

Some religions seem to be limited to a specific country or region – Hinduism is mainly in India; Sikhism is mainly in the Punjab; Islam is mainly around what is known as the 10:40 window – circling the Earth just above the equator – and it mainly spread to where it is now militarily between 622 and 750AD.

But if God is the Creator; the God of the whole Earth, then surely the whole earth – every culture, every nation was made for Him and will contain something that points to Him.

That is what the Bible teaches; that is what Jesus commissioned us for – “Make disciples of all nations...” And that is what Paul believed.

So Paul wasn't advocating 'foreign gods' but the God of the whole Earth

And instead of contradicting and tearing down Greek religion, Paul told them about Jesus who is The One that they were searching for through all their idolatry and many different false gods. Jesus is the fulfilment of what they had searched for.

We need to get the truth deep into our hearts that everyone – from every nation and language and culture, was made in God's Image and was made to worship Him. And in every culture, although it has been clouded by sin, there are things that point towards God.

And God loves every tribe and language and people group and nation so much that He gave His Son that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but will have eternal Life.

There is a great book called “Eternity in their hearts” by Don Richardson that looks at different cultures around the world and shows how they were already seeking the True God that we know – even before they ever heard the Gospel.

I have a Friend in a Muslim country who felt prompted to ask a taxi driver whether he had had any dreams. Straight away he described a dream about Jesus.

The next day he asked a different taxi driver the same question – and he said ‘No, but everyone else in my mosque has had that dream’

Paul believed that Jesus is the Saviour of the whole earth – and therefore every culture would respond to the Gospel

We need to believe the same.

So living in a multicultural city is not a problem; it’s a great privilege, because everyone in this city has the same Creator and everyone in this city was made in the image of God – and everyone in every culture, from every language and people and tribe and nation can know Jesus as their Saviour.

He is not just a Jewish God; He is not just an English God or a Western God; He is the God of the whole Earth and the nations have been given to Him as an inheritance and the ends of the earth as His possession (Psalm 2:8)

We are here to reach the nations of Birmingham

Let’s be stirred by Paul’s example in Athens.

Let the God of the whole Earth stir faith in you!