

Sixth Sunday of Easter (Acts 17. 22-31)

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We have been reading the Acts of the Apostles, asking how the experience of Jesus being raised from the dead was reflected in the practices of the first Christian communities. So far this Easter season, we have looked at the practices of baptism, holding goods in common, and forgiveness. Finally tonight, we focus on the resurrection practice of mission, the preaching of the gospel to members of the synagogue, and the pagan and Gentile worlds.

The book of Acts is full of evangelistic encounters and mission journeys. From Jesus' anointing the disciples to 'be my witnesses ... to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1.8) through to Peter's preaching in Jerusalem, and the missionary adventures of Philip, Barnabas, Paul, Silas and Timothy, it's clear that being sent to share the 'good news' with the whole world was central to the church's response to Jesus' resurrection. And, for me at least, this feels not an entirely straightforward practice to have handed down to us. We inherit a legacy of what have often been culturally insensitive if not downright violent Christian missionary endeavours. 'Brand Christian' is profoundly tainted by this legacy for many in our society. How then are we to understand and participate in the resurrection practice of mission and evangelism, in our age? Does today's reading offer any insights?

Paul has arrived by himself in Athens after an involved journey through Asia Minor, Macedonia and modern-day Greece, in and out of prison, being rescued from mobs and arguing with his companions, Barnabas and John Mark. He is waiting for two of his colleagues in the mission field, Silas and Timothy, to join him and in the meantime is deeply distressed (we are told) to see that Athens 'was full of idols'. He

begins then to talk of Jesus with Jews in the synagogue and also with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, who bring him to the public square, the Areopagus, and invite him with the utmost courtesy to speak: 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means' (Acts 17.20).

And Paul, like any good contextual theologian and missionary, invites his pagan audience to hear his story in terms of something they already understand. They are, he flatters them, 'extremely religious' because not only do they have many objects of worship, but they maintain an altar to an 'unknown God'. Now whether this was because the Athenians were hedging their bets, or whether they dimly apprehended the reality of another god is not clear from the text: but Paul takes advantage of this opening in the city's divine economy to proclaim the name of the God of Israel and of Jesus Christ: 'What ... you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you'.

An obvious way for us to hear Paul's proclamation here is as an attempt to replace one religion, one set of beliefs with another. You worship these 'false' gods, these idols; I worship the 'true' god. Thinking you are religious and devout you are really mistaken – but if you recognise my God as the one true God and repent, you will be saved. There's something right about this way of seeing it, but something misleading too. On this kind of interpretation of what Paul is doing, the basic structure of religion and of worship is seen as common across religious systems – and the difference lies in the identity of the God who is the object of worship and devotion. For the Athenians, then, coming to Christian faith would be just a matter of inserting the 'one true God' in place of the 'unknown God' on their altar, and adjusting their observances accordingly. But I don't think it's quite that simple.

Two things might give us pause. First of all, Paul insists that the God he proclaims is not on the same level as the gods he sees in Athens who are 'objects' of worship. 'The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by

human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things'. In other words, the God he proclaims is not in competition with any object of human invention, 'an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals' but is one in whom 'we live and move and have our being'. So the God Paul proclaims doesn't want to be installed on an altar to join or even replace the panoply of gods, but is different altogether. This God cannot be an *object* for our worship, somehow separate from us, but is the ground of our worship, the reality in which we are caught up, in which we are enabled to participate. For, as Paul says, 'he is not far from each one of us'.

We could still hear this in terms of a claim that 'my God is bigger than your God', a kind of competition. But I think something else is going on here, and that it is connected to the experience of resurrection. Remember that Jesus has spent his life bringing about the possibility of human community which subverts all the usual social and religious distinctions between pure and impure, righteous and unrighteous, graced and cursed. By his resurrection, which is God's 'yes' to his way of life and his theology, the first disciples see that God will not be caught in any human religious system which operates to exclude, to curse or condemn, any system which uses fear and violence to maintain its own order, identity, or power.

It is in the light of this experience, this revelation of God, that Paul can say to the Athenians, that 'we are God's offspring' and acknowledge his kinship with these pagans. And this is an extraordinary breakthrough for a formerly zealous and righteous Pharisee. Earlier in the book of Acts, the early church has wrestled agonisedly about the relationship between Jew and Gentile, and the continuing place of purity laws concerning circumcision and food. By gradually and with great difficulty being drawn to let go these markers of tribal religious identity, the church's very understanding of what it means to worship God, to be faithful to God is transformed. True worship is no longer identified with maintaining observances, fulfilling religious and cultic duties of any kind, but with becoming sharers in the life

and work of God – relating to others as Jesus did beyond all boundaries, healing the broken-hearted and setting free the captives in the Spirit of his ‘anarchic mercy’.

And if this is what worship of the ‘true’ God is, then that affects what mission in the name of this God is. It is not the replacement of one cult by another, one set of beliefs or laws by another. It is not a tacit kind of competition between images of power and mechanisms for social control invented by human culture. It is instead the undoing of all those mechanisms for social control that masquerade as religion, as piety – which is why James Alison calls Christianity a kind of ‘un-religion’. The God of Jesus Christ can be truly proclaimed only as an invitation into a new way of being in community, a new set of possibilities for human being and becoming through the gift of being accepted, loved, forgiven. It is the revelation of a new anthropology as much as it is the revelation of a new theology.

So what does that mean for the practice of Christian mission and evangelisation? On the one hand, it does mean that discipleship of Jesus Christ challenges certain ways of being religious and of ordering human community. The world and all its practices are open to the ‘judgement’ of Jesus of Nazareth who has been raised from the dead and seeks the healing and life of all. When, in the name of God, a religious system condemns or refuses mercy or props up identity by violent means, then the Christian proclamation *is* a proclamation of judgement as well as an invitation into a different form of life. But this is a judgement that applies to Christian communities as much as to any other, and our evangelisation of the world always and necessarily involves a re-evangelisation of ourselves.

On the other hand, the practice of mission in a community of resurrection must enact what it proclaims – it must itself show forth the new possibilities for human community and belonging across all differences and divides, rather than manipulating or dominating others into ‘my way’ of seeing the world. And this means honouring the particularities of other people, listening deeply to stories and the riches of other traditions, discovering together where there is life and what brings

new life to all. Mission in a Christian key is necessarily conversational – that is – a practice that is converting for all.

And that seems not a bad place to conclude our exploration of the practices that follow from resurrection – with the invitation to continuous conversion through and into love, for us and the whole world.