

Sermon 19 October 2014 – On Acts 17: 22-31, Paul’s sermon to the Athenians at the Areopagus

The Parable of the Nightingale – Andrew Gosler

May I speak in the name of the Unknown God, who loves, sustains, delights in and weeps with his Creation.

So Paul is on his second great mission to Greece. In Athens doors open to him as people are attracted to hear the Word, and he is taken to the Areopagus to speak. The Areopagus, or Ares Rock, rises about 380 feet above the land below and sits near the Acropolis. Traditionally it was believed to have been the place where Ares, the Greek God of War, stood trial before the other gods for the murder of Poseidon’s son. It had been home therefore to the highest court in Greece for both legal and religious matters, and even under Roman rule remained an important meeting place where philosophy, religion, and law were discussed. The symbolism of Paul’s sermon at the Areopagus then is intense. Paul is now speaking at, and indeed to, the very heart of Greek culture.

Paul is moved, even disturbed, by the extent of idolatry within this great civilisation, but even here he finds a reference to ‘the Unknown God’ and is able to locate the Gospel message here.

Paul’s sermon at the Areopagus offers us some of the most important lessons about how we can speak the Gospel to any age and culture, and he presents three great truths for us to hold onto in that ministry and mission.

First, we must speak to the culture. By this I don’t mean that we should to pretend to be of that culture. No, Paul never pretends to be Greek, but he shows cultural sensitivity by showing respect for the beliefs of the people to whom he speaks, and the resonance between their beliefs and culture and the truth he proclaims.

Secondly, he speaks of God’s Grace, and of being the very ground of all being. In other words the true and living God is not the construction of any one culture or tribe, but is universal to all Creation. *“The God”, he says, “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". He also grounds all of Creation within God "*For in him we live and move and have our being*" and he shows the resonance of this with Greek culture saying "*as even some of your own poets have said 'For we too are his offspring.'*"

Paul uses this as an explanation for his third essential truth, that everyone is searching for God "*so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us*" he says.

So how do we take this great wisdom out into the world today, into our culture, and even into our workplace? Where do we look for those essential doors into culture in such a multicultural country? In a population of 63.7 million, are there not in fact 63.7 million cultures, the cultures of age groups, of genders, of communities, of occupations, of pastimes, sports, politics, families and even cultures of sickness? It looks hopeless doesn't it? But take heart, the cultures we must speak to are the cultures of connectedness to God, which exist even in a culture whose prevailing sentiment might be summarised as 'I'm not religious but...' because that 'but' expresses Paul's third great truth, that everyone is searching for God, whether they themselves acknowledge the fact or not.

We experience connectedness with God through our inner being, but we find affirmation of our sense of God-centeredness through our connection with the rest of Creation, both human and non-human. Both are important, although personally I have often found affirmation from the non-human world to be most powerful because it cannot be prejudiced by human desires. The affirmation of children is similarly honest.

I want to illustrate for you the cultures of connectedness with, or disconnectedness from, God, with a real-life story that can act as a parable; let's call it *the Parable of the Nightingale*. On the fifth of May, Caroline and I visited Paxton Pits Nature Reserve near St Neot's. We try to visit it every year if we can because the reserve is one of the best places in the country to hear Nightingales, with 20 singing males this year I believe. What do you need to know about Nightingales? The Nightingale is a rather boring-looking brown bird with a red tail, in size between that of a Robin and Song Thrush, but it is the best songster of all British birds, and beloved of poets from Chaucer to Keats as a consequence. British Nightingales migrate to West Africa, south of

the Sahara for the winter. Their numbers have declined by more than 90% during my lifetime.

We were blessed by being able to eat our lunch with a Nightingale in full song not 20 feet away, and I'd like now to play you a recording I made of it on my phone. Enjoy the Nightingale, but also notice the sounds in the background. The recording starts with the sound of a camera shutter – not my camera.

PLAY RECORDING

As we ate our lunch and I made this recording a string of people passed by, most noticing, but some oblivious to the wondrous sound that was bursting from a small hawthorn by the path. The first to pass were two middle-aged couples, not birdwatchers, but they asked what it was. When we told them they said they'd heard the voice before and thought it was a Nightingale but weren't sure. They knew it was very special and were grateful for the confirmation.

Then a young couple passed by without noticing. I pointed out the Nightingale to them and told them how rare it was. They weren't really interested, and even said 'what's a *Mightingale*'?, as they'd never heard of it before. Caroline said to me "doesn't it make you want to push them in the lake?" Well, frankly, yes it did. It took me years as a birdwatcher to hear my first Nightingale and here it was for them freely given and they didn't care... But on whose behalf was I angry, and who's to say they didn't reflect on it later, and maybe look it up on Wikipedia? That's the point about Grace, it's their right to be interested or not.

Next to pass were another young couple. They were birdwatchers. They knew what it was and how precious it was. They rejoiced in it and the fact that others loved it too, and smiled knowingly at us as they passed by.

I made the recording. I was so enthralled by the song myself that I was oblivious to the photographer clicking away next to me. Yes, we could see the bird too. The photographer wanted to capture the moment, to document it, but in so doing he impinged unwittingly on the enjoyment of others, albeit afterwards.

Finally the noisy children, who had been approaching throughout my recording, arrived. To our delight, two of them in particular, a girl named Lucy I

guess aged about ten, and her younger brother were enthralled by it, asked us all about it, and could I show it to them and set the telescope for them to see, which I did. They stayed with us so long looking for the Nightingale that I had to point out to them that their parents were disappearing in the distance and perhaps they better catch them up, and as they thanked us the boy said 'I hope you see a bird you've never seen before'. What a beautiful blessing.

The voice of God and the Nightingale is there for all to hear. Some know how precious a gift this is, but aren't sure of what they heard and need a little gentle confirmation. Others don't notice at all; they don't know the name or its significance and we must be patient. Some want to measure and document, but perhaps risk missing the wonder of the moment and impinging on the rejoicing of others. Yet a few others recognise and love his voice, and delight in the gift they have received by Grace. And yet others are eager to open that door to let in knowledge of the Father – our role is simply to facilitate that and not to get in the way, let the Father and the Nightingale plant their own delights in the hearts of those with ears to hear and eyes to see, and they will bless you.

Heavenly Father, open our eyes to the wonders of your Creation, that they might lead us to see you. As the Psalmist wrote:

Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth;

² sing the glory of his name;

give to him glorious praise.

Amen