

**Acts 17:15-34**  
**Inundated with idols**

Very likely you have heard this last week about the enormous numbers of people flocking to the **Cornish beaches**. 12000 people on a single day at Perranporth, for example - presumably with the tide *out!* The so-called **staycation** is the theme of the moment, with **travel between countries** still a very nervous and unreliable affair, as Coronavirus levels fluctuate around the globe.

So I would imagine that one feature of longer-distance airline travel is taking a serious hit. Not that I've ever done this, because I have really very little experience of aviation, but you hear now and again of a "stopover".

I guess we're familiar with **trains** and connections, and how sometimes you will need to hang around on a **railway station** while waiting to board a different train to take you further along your journey. But usually we're talking a couple of hours at most. Whereas between connecting *flights* it can be a decidedly longer affair ... the *stopover*. In fact, you can even choose to give yourself a little break from the journey by extending that time, and seeing the local sights ... or at least you could do, before the virus and all those various restrictions made that far less viable.

But it seems to me that we have Paul here, in this passage in Acts, in essentially a kind of "stopover" situation. He is in between stages of his **missionary journey** around the edge of the Aegean Sea. And things seem to have come to a bit of a halt in **Athens**, as we read.

But since it's not just Coronavirus but **extreme heat** and **wildfires** afflicting Greece at present, how about we just drop in on Paul for a few minutes this morning with a **virtual visit**?

Some of those other places that we've heard about, the last couple of weeks, perhaps you would have found them a bit tricky to place on a map: **Philippi** or **Thessalonica**. You might happen to know, or you might just think, probably Greece somewhere ... ish. But **Athens** you're much more likely to definitely locate as Greece.

You might have remembered that **Olympic Games** have been hosted by Athens in 2004 - and also 1896, when the modern Olympic movement started. There's a lesser-known play of **Shakespeare**, too, called **Timon of Athens**. So Athens has been, if you like, a "known place" for hundreds of years. And those **pictures** of the ruins there shout out at us that this must have been a mighty impressive place, when all those now ruins were buildings at their prime.

And yet, wandering around through many of them in their heyday, the apostle Paul was not exactly impressed. Luke uses a rather different word, which we have in our ESV translations as

**... his spirit was provoked within him ...**

(Acts 17:16)

Now what on earth was it that *provoked* him about what he saw? And what did he choose to do about it? And why? Why couldn't he just have **rubbernecked** around the place as an excited tourist, like so many of the rest of us would have? Why was he *impressed* in exactly the opposite direction? And should we be, too?

Or perhaps you just think that it's not really that Athens itself is a bad place, but it was that, as we sometimes say nowadays, "Paul's in a bad place". Well, he had come from a rather unsettling situation, you might remember.

The chapter started with the missionary team's visit to Thessalonica, as we saw last week. And that started out well enough.

***And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ."***

(Acts 17:2-3)

And the outcome looked good, too:

***And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.***

(Acts 17:4)

But then a riot ensues:

***But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, ...***

(Acts 17:5)

As a result, Paul and Silas exit the scene briskly under cover of night:

***The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue.***

(Acts 17:10)

And, as you see, they resume their customary approach to a new city: find the synagogue, preach to the Jews and the "god-fearers" there. Again, good results. Better than at Thessalonica, actually:

***Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men.***

(Acts 17:11-12)

And then *that goes pear-shaped* too, when we find that the people that had become so agitated at Thessalonica are ready to travel to Berea and cause trouble there too.

***But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds.***

(Acts 17:13)

So once again Paul has to make a hasty exit:

***Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, ...***

(Acts 17:14)

But this time his partners in mission *haven't* come with him. Paul is escorted down the **east coast of Greece** as far as Athens - hopefully a safe distance!

***... but Silas and Timothy remained there. Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, ...***

(Acts 17:14-15)

But that situation doesn't suit Paul at all. He wants that team of his to be working together, and he uses all the leverage he can to get them reunited.

***... and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed.***

(Acts 17:15)

So what do you imagine Paul's state of mind might be, in Athens, alone?

***Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, ...***

(Acts 17:16)

This is no planned stopover, with the opportunity to pass a bit of time sightseeing. But it's not as if Paul has any confirmation that his order is going to be obeyed, or how quickly he might see Silas and Timothy again. He can't do what we would nowadays, send a **text** asking *where are you?*

Maybe things are going so well back in Berea that they won't come, or won't come right away? Maybe they don't *want* to come, if Paul's approach only seems to attract violent opposition?

Maybe Paul himself is in some kind of shock, still, rushed away for fear of his life, only now thinking that he *maybe* need not be continually looking over his shoulder? Maybe he's just tired? Or could he be starting to entertain some doubts about this mission, if he's becoming a marked man all across the Roman Empire? Remember the words shouted back in Thessalonica?

***“These men who have turned the world upside down ...”***

(Acts 17:6)

What if he *is* an emissary of turmoil instead of peace? What if everywhere he goes he is going to be shouted down and hounded out of city after city? Has he got what it takes?

So what would you prescribe for Paul right now? A rest, for a few days? Maybe make that a proper holiday. Get away from it all for a while. Forget the office job and the **rat race**! Perhaps that is even what he’s doing here in Athens, at first. But if that is what he resolved and decided to do, then the chapter would end here. Paul would have spent a few days, or a few weeks, just seeing the sights, enjoying the **street food**, commissioning a street artist to sketch his portrait against the backdrop of one of those world-famous pieces of architecture (**selfies** were a lot harder to come by in those days!).

But he *doesn’t* totally switch off. And here’s our first point of challenge for today, I think. I’m not trying to set up an organisation called *Workaholics for Jesus* ... but it is possible that we over-rate our need for “me time”? Do we so protect those hours or days of holiday that, in practice, we flick the **off switch** on God during those times?

Please don’t get me wrong. There is nothing wrong with reading an ordinary novel while you’re **sunning yourself** on the beach. Nor, if you want, is there any problem with reading some Christian book you’ve been wanting to get around to having a look at.

But if you’re on holiday, do you make a point of *not* going to church? Is God an add-on - even an important add-on - to your life, or is he the most fundamental thing about you? Do you want to keep areas of our lives, or times of our lives, as a kind of a God-free zone, where we can just chill and be ourselves? Or is the *real you* now something inextricably linked to the life of Jesus Christ?

***I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.***

(Galatians 2:20)

So there is Paul, on his own in Athens, perhaps needing some time to recharge his batteries. But he has not put his Christian mind into sleep mode for the duration. And something strikes him here in Athens.

Observation  
Conversation  
Invitation  
Presentation

- **Observation** (16)

***Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.***

(Acts 17:16)

You must have seen some of those puzzles, over the years, with images that can be viewed in two or more ways? **What do you see?** Is it the fashionable young woman or the ancient crone? And what does Paul see in Athens?

Numerous examples of stunning **architecture**, with all these temples and shrines all over the place? Is he drawn to admire their beauty, and reflect upon the amazing skills of the **craftsmen**?

Or does he reflect upon the cost of all of this, and admire the people who must have contributed so much in order to honour and reverence their particular understanding of cosmic reality? Does he wonder at that level of costly devotion?

Actually, neither of these. His Christian mind remains alert, even in he is thinking to just chill for a while. Yes, this is awesome architecture. Yes, it reflects deep and committed devotion. But it is a devotion to **idols**, non-existent deceits and parodies at best of the True and Living God.

But even that is not the full extent of it. The city is **full of idols**. The word Luke uses there gives the impression of **staggering under the weight and burden** of so many idols. The place is *heaving* with them, *creaking* with them. The place is *drowning* in all this devotion to non-entities. It is not an expression of human variety and skill and ingenuity; it is slowly sucking the very life *out of* them.

Folks, when you read your **newspapers**, when you scroll through your **news feeds**, when you watch or listen to the **news**, is your brain switched on to the spiritual implications in what is being reported? Do you reflect upon what you hear and see, in the light of what God has told us about this world and his place in it, and the Saviour we need?

We're told, perhaps, that the **economy** is growing, which must be good, we presume. But do we reflect on whether everyone spending more *is* actually good? What is all of this money being spent *on*, and why? Does it really make our lives any better?

We're told, perhaps, that troubled people are being taught **mindfulness** techniques to reduce their anxiety and stress levels, which must be good, we presume. But do we reflect on whether people are also being convinced to just dull a pain which is pointing to something seriously wrong in their lives, that can only be cured by meeting with Jesus Christ, the Saviour?

Folks, Paul's thinking processes were not switched off during these few days of furlough in Athens. He saw things for what they were. And he was emotionally moved by this observation.

**Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.**

(Acts 17:16)

That is a word about inner turmoil, and reaction against. You have to see the word in its context, of course, and the only other time we get it in the NT is here:

**[Love] does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;**

(1 Corinthians 13:5)

So what we've got, I think, is a good irritation and a bad irritation. The AV for this says, "is not easily provoked", and that is exactly right, too. It's not saying that we must *never* react against things, but we must not frequently or easily react with that kind of inner fire. If people feel they have to **walk on eggshells** around you, it's not at all a good sign. Maybe we should ask people whether we come over in this way. Do you dare ask someone that question during coffee today?

But Paul's reaction here in Acts is entirely appropriate. There are thousands of people in this city of Athens having their physical and spiritual lives crushed out of them by all this worship of pretend gods. They are blind. They are like **lost sheep**.

How could Paul *not* respond to this *tragedy* of Athens? And in a moment we'll see what his "provoked within him" response led him to do. But let me first ask you a question: do you know what *provokes* you, for good or bad?

If it's irritability, what are your triggers? And what are you doing about them? Talking to yourself, talking *Scripture* to yourself, praying for God to change that temper and make you more like Jesus?

If it's reaction to something unwholesome, though, it can still be a bad reaction. What does it lead you to do? Blast all the Taliban in your prayers? Or is it something more constructive ... which could be as simple as engaging in ...

- **Conversation (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.**

(Acts 17:17)

That little word *so* is a clear link between the two sentences. *That* provocation led to *this* specific action by way of response. He might have done it anyway. He now probably feels *compelled*, out of compassion, to do so.

He goes into the synagogue. Maybe he had been giving the synagogue a wide berth, following his experiences with the angry Jews of Thessalonica. But no, he *must* engage there once again. But not in any hugely confrontational way. No, he picks up that tool, once again (same as v2), of dialogue. Just talking. Seeing where the conversation goes. Perhaps pointing out holes in the other person's thinking - or helping them to see connections that they hadn't previously seen.

And who does he speak to? Well, when he deliberately places himself in the synagogue, it will be with the official signed-up **Jews, and the "God-fearers"**, the "devout persons" who would have been meeting there too.

But on the other days of the week, it's the market-place, rubbing shoulders with the traders, the buyers, the people who are just passing through. Anyone, basically - that translation "**those who happened to be there**" is exactly right. Trusting that perhaps *God* will have sent someone who "just happened" to be there today.

Folks, are you ready to just engage in conversation with those *whomever* the Lord sends across your path today? Do you always have to be in so much rush that you cannot show any interest in them? Do you always "have to be going", if there are things being said that could give you an opportunity to share what *you* think, what *your* take on that current topic is, what *you* did this weekend, a book or a TV programme that really moved *you* ... and why? Are you willing to do a bit of what we read Paul did at Thessalonica:

***So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.***

(1 Thessalonians 2:8)

Folks, are we really so desperately unsure of God's willingness to save people - or so desperately unsure about the power of the Holy Spirit to open people's eyes to the light of the gospel of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ - that we shy away from any conversation rather than delight in the possible opportunity?

Not, of course, that this will be the case on every occasion, as it turns out here. Or that what follows will always seem totally positive right away, just as it *doesn't* here, either. But Paul's conversation in Athens leads on now to an ...

- **Invitation** (18-21)

I'm just guessing that some of Paul's conversation is overheard. Or it could just be that "those who happened to be there", one of the people he more specifically engaged, was part of this elite group. Whichever, the conversation opens up ...

***Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him.***  
(Acts 17:18)

The reaction is a bit mixed. Some are dismissive:

***And some said, “What does this babbler wish to say?”***

(Acts 17:18)

Remember that we're not always going to get very positive responses. Here, it's more like a belittling response, one of those Greek slang words that nowadays we might use a word like “idiot” or “goon” or “numpty”, someone whose opinion is worthless because they are really out of their depth, having no idea what they're really talking about.

And of course that's precisely what people who consider themselves *educated* and *intellectual* are very likely to say, when someone chooses to believe and argue for something that they have dismissed.

I had an RE teacher at school like that. I remember him saying that “there are some people nowadays who still take the Bible literally ... they're called ‘fundamentalists’”. Implication: but we know better nowadays; we can read the Bible as it *should* have been written. And this was someone who was quite happy to suggest to us that Jesus didn't walk on the water, but happened to be walking on a sandbank never seen before nor since, which experienced fishermen on that lake knew nothing about!

Folks, don't think that letters after someone's name means that they are actually any more perceptive of spiritual reality than you might be, with just a Bible in your hand, and the Spirit of God in your heart!

But there were some, at least, a bit more receptive to Paul. They at least listened enough to get the gist of what he was saying.

***Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.***

(Acts 17:18)

... although they missed out on just what Paul was meaning by “resurrection”: *not* another deity called *Anastasis*, but the *actual* “anastasis” (Greek word), literal and bodily *resurrection* of Jesus.

But it's new, it's different enough, it's at least interesting enough to pass the time of day bouncing the ideas around. Okay ... an invitation to speak at their elite philosophical club. It will make for a bit of light entertainment, at least.

***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. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.”***

(Acts 17:19-20)

They're like us, actually, with *new* stuff being given some kind of premium.

***Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.***

(Acts 17:21)

Not sure it's really a very healthy approach, really. What if that *old, old story of Jesus and his love* is actually true?!

But here we are, with the spectacular climax of this chapter. Paul's ...

- **Presentation (22-34)**

And there's masses of stuff in what Paul says here. It takes a full sermon and more to do much more than scratch the surface, and I've only left myself the last few minutes. Maybe we need to come back and check out the detail a bit more, some time soon. But what can we just skim off the top here - perhaps particularly about how to speak to your average unbeliever nowadays?

*Start with some point of contact*

***So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.***

(Acts 17:22)

Now the AV there has, instead of "religious", the word "superstitious", and I think the more modern word is better. "Superstitious" makes Paul sound as if he's telling off these learned men for something really childish, and I don't think that's what he is really doing here. "Religious", though, hits it right on the head.

Remember Paul has been walking around **Athens** with all those statues and temples and shrines. The place is *heaving* with them. How could his hearers deny what he's saying? They just have to admit he's right there. But what ... implicit question left hanging ... is he going to make of this situation? Is he going to approve of it or condemn it? Can you almost hear them thinking how they're going to respond to whichever tack he takes? Only ... rather like Jesus ... he doesn't take the immediate course. He picks up on something rather curious instead.

***"For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: 'To the unknown god.'"***

(Acts 17:23)

Does he say that with a bit of a teasing smile, do you think? *Come on, you guys, you have to admit that this is a bit quirky, don't you?* So what is he going to say now? Can you see how Paul might have got them wanting to hear his answer?

Folks, I think we could do with learning some of this art of *fishing* for men. How can we ask good questions that draw people into conversation, and on

conversations on subjects that really matter? Can we learn to drop comments which people can pick up on, if they want to, or just pass by, if not - so that any conversation that does ensue is based on *their* opting into it, rather than just *our* manipulation?

Remember ...

... that the world is largely in the dark

Somewhere along the line, though, sharing the Gospel is going to get challenging to a hearer. Nowadays, it seems to be the case that people do not warm so much to answers with authority. The spirit of the age is that everyone can be right, at the same time, that there are no wrong answers - even if various of the answers contradict one another.

But that is not where Paul is coming from. There is truth and there is error. There is light and there is dark. And we claim that we are coming with a message that is true, concerning *the* True and Living God.

***“What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”***

(Acts 17:23)

... that the Gospel challenges just about every assumption about our understanding of life

In the next few verses, Paul flatly contradicts many of the beloved assumptions of the world of his day. Some of the assumptions even nowadays might be the same. How did the world come about?

***“The God who made the world and everything in it, ...”***

(Acts 17:24)

What's the value of religious places, and religious offerings?

***“... being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.”***

(Acts 17:24-25)

No, it's the other way around. *God* gives. The true God is a God of *grace*. Are there some specially favoured races or nations? Us with our “Christian heritage”, perhaps?

***“And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, ... ”***

(Acts 17:26)

Aren't we in charge of our own destinies?

***“... having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ...”***

(Acts 17:26)

Can't we work out for ourselves what God is like? Doesn't look much like it!

***“Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.”***

(Acts 17:29)

*... that there is an urgency to repent*

First, there is that wonderful fact that God *wants* us to find fellowship with him.

***“... 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, ...”***

(Acts 17:27)

But this isn't just a longing or recommendation on the part of God, but a command:

***“The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ...”***

(Acts 17:30)

And how can we dare make such an offensive, uncompromising demand? Because of a proven fact of history:

*... that our faith is underpinned by the certainty of the resurrection of Jesus*

***“... because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”***

(Acts 17:31)

Of course not everyone will go along with this, immediately or eventually. You get precisely that mixture of responses from these high flyers of the Areopagus. Some a very definite *No*. Some a maybe ... well, *some* time, perhaps. But some who believed.

***Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” So Paul went out from their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.***

(Acts 17:32-34)

Not as many as believed when Paul spoke in his traditional way back in the synagogue ... but he had to take his hearers on a much longer journey, from full-on paganism. So, “some men ... and ... and others” ... that should be an encouragement. To Paul. And to us.

Folks, people *today* start as far back as those clever-clogses of ancient Athens, as ignorant of God despite all their supposed intelligence. And Jesus is the same, of course,

***Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.***

(Hebrews 13:8)

And the good news is therefore just the same, too: the same message, and the same power:

***For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.***

(Romans 1:16)

We’ve heard of the Jews in Thessalonica and Berea, and now the Greeks in Athens. Wonder where we’ll be heading for our next **virtual visit** next week ...

**Speaking now with Gentiles, Paul adopts a different approach to point them to the same Christ**