

ONE GOD FOR EVERY NATION

'He created every race of man of one stock, to inhabit the whole earth's surface ...and they were to seek God, and it might be, touch and find him'. St Paul's word in today's reading from Acts.

Well, here we are...not quite 'every race' but a lot of different nationalities – all at this one time and one place here in St Catherine's: English, Nigerian, Welsh, Jamaican, a Channel Islander. And on other Sundays there would be Chinese, North American, Zimbabwean, Sierra Leonean.....

Who and what have I missed out....?

Ah, so there's an Australian here today..... and a New Zealander.....and a Spaniard.....and an Egyptian.....well, you prove my point!

And some of us may be a mix, like me - part English , part Irish, part Eastern European Jewish, with one great great grandfather an Irish Roman Catholic soldier who became a gas lamp lighter in London, one of whose sons, unusually for a working class young man then, became an Anglican priest , and another great great grandfather, Moses Moses, who sold second hand clothes off a stall in the East End and whose sons went on to found Moss Bros. Alas, no shares in the company trickled down to me.

Multi-multiculturalism, in its broad sense, is of course nothing new, for all that it agitates some people so much.

Paul, the main character in our reading from Acts, and his life, constitute one such example.

A Jew, but also a Roman citizen.

Born in Tarsus, a coastal city in what is now S E Turkey, at that time a great trading centre on the Mediterranean - a city which would have been full of a polyglot mix of nationalities.

Born in Tarsus, but sent to school in Jerusalem - and not just a bog standard school but the school of Gamaliel, one of the most renowned rabbis of all time.

And a school noted for its balanced education, where Paul (or Saul as he then was) would have imbibed not only Hebraic scholarship but also elements of classical, i.e Greek, philosophy and ethics.

And Paul spoke not only Aramaic but a form of Greek too.

A tent maker by trade but a highly educated one.

And all of this, of course, fitted him well for his dialogue with the ancient Greeks, when his second series of missionary travels took him to Athens, which is where we catch up with him in the reading from Acts.

By this time, the first century AD, Athens was yet another province of the Roman Empire and no longer the pre-eminent power it had once been. But it was still an intellectual power house of the civilised world - renowned for its literature, its natural sciences, its mastery of maths, its political sciences and its philosophy - philosophy which still influences our thinking in the West today.

So it is into this challenging context that Paul comes, preaching his new, strange, unfamiliar Gospel of Christ.

And the situation is even more challenging than that. For the speech recorded in Acts isn't just a speech given on any old street corner, pub or taverna . No, Paul has been summoned to defend his message at the Areopagus - a prominent landmark in Athens, previously the seat of the City's council of elders - a bit like our House of Lords, if you like - and subsequently a court trying certain serious cases - a bit like the Old Bailey, if you like. So a place of history and prestige.

And Paul is there because he's been summoned not by any rag tag or bobtail but, as Acts says, by Epicurean and Stoic philosophers - followers of two of the leading schools of thought in classical times.

The great scholar, Professor Henry Chadwick, puts it thus: 'The translation of the Gospel into the hellenistic world was a task of great intricacy calling for the highest sensitivity....the missionaries were in a twilight world of pagan syncretism, magic and astrology....The pagan world was quite accustomed to myths of great heroes, like Hercules, who were elevated to divine rank as a reward for their merits....The Christians amazed the world by the extraordinary claim that the divine redeemer of their story had lately been born of a woman in Judaea, had been crucified under Pontius Pilate [and] had risen again....'

Paul's education and background would have helped him to cope with this. He actually alludes indirectly to Greek writers in his speech. And most crucially he seizes on the space, the altar, dedicated on the Areopagus to ' the unknown god'.

The Greeks of course worshipped a variety of gods, primarily the 12 major gods of Olympus , led by Zeus. Gods who were capricious, vengeful, jealous and unpredictable. But perhaps the ancient Greeks' rational minds suggested to them that a divinity might exist whom they did not know, that their knowledge might not be all-encompassing - a useful corrective perhaps to those today who think that a particular brand of dogma or belief contains all the answers.

And Paul seizes on the fact of this altar to the unknown god to proclaim that this is the God of the Christians - that this place in their pantheon is now filled by his God, and indeed that the whole pantheon is now superceded by this one God.....

Today we face not dissimilar challenges to those of Paul.

He took Christianity into a territory, an intellectual and spiritual territory, that was alien to what he preached - one God for all nations , one God who would reconcile all nations, one God who would deal justly and mercifully , not capriciously or vengefully , with all nations.

We today preach or try to live out a Gospel in a society which worships other powerful gods - not only gods of other faiths, but more insidiously the unseen ones of status or power or celebrity or materialism.

There are three lessons we might take from the way in which Paul went about addressing his challenges - apart of course from his burning conviction.

First, he was opportunistic- nimble and agile to seize the opportunity with which the altar to the unknown god presented him. He seized the moment.

Second, he drew on Greek culture to make his unfamiliar message less strange - as I've said, this speech at the Areopagus alludes to Greek writers and, elsewhere, in his epistles, he draws for example on Greek Stoic philosophy.

Thirdly he emphasised some parts of the Christian message more than others to make it more compelling to Greeks. So, although it is not in this speech , elsewhere he shifted Christianity from its strong focus at that time on the end of the world and the second coming, an alien concept to the Greeks.

Nimbleness, adaptability, drawing on but not succumbing to the surrounding culture - all useful pointers for us today in grappling with a Zeitgeist antithetical in many ways to the Christian message.

Finally, as we know, Christianity can often appear unattractive to those who do not believe. Paul and the Gospel reading today give us one hint as to how we might address that. Paul speaks of seeking God and perhaps touching and finding him. Jesus in the Gospel says 'I am in my Father and in you'.

If we saw more clearly the divine spark in each one of us , whichever nation or race we come from, whatever individually we may be like as characters, and if we responded to that divine spark more strongly and warmly, we would come closer to touching God and closer to creating an attractive narrative for the rest of the world to follow.

And so full circle. For Paul it was his belief in one God which made it impossible to think that the knowledge of God and the moral law could be confined to one race alone. And we here in this place , at this hour, on this day, are living proof of how right he was.

In the words of the Psalmist :
'Bless God all nations;
Let his praise be heard far and near'.

Amen

William Chapman (Churchwarden), 21 May 2017