

**Easter 6: Acts 17:22-31****1 Peter 3:13-22****John 14:15-21**

Hello from the North East of Scotland or as we say up here "Fit like t'dae?" to which the approved response is "nae bad, ye ken". So it might be said that we a common link with the rest of the UK as much as we do with you good folk in Connecticut for as Oscar Wilde wrote in *The Canterville Ghost*: 'We have really everything in common with America nowadays except, of course, language'. I promise not to dwell on the need for a 'u' in colour and doubt that Aluminium will feature in the rest of this talk so no debate on the correct pronunciation there. It is my hope that the thoughts I'd like to share today will allow similar reflections on your side of 'the pond' as those we're undertaking on our side and however we pronounce them there are some words that we, and most if not all the world, do have in common at present. "- novel coronavirus - covid 19 - lock-down" have headed the newspaper columns for many weeks and now "easing the lock-down - opening for business" are starting to feature in conversations and headlines. We might feel a little like bears emerging from hibernation, hungry and grumpy, as we look to resume a pattern of life that is more open than the shut-up life style we've accepted over the last couple of months but, as debate sways over what are the appropriate actions and the rates of change we should set as we turn towards 'normality', the question of what is to be the 'new normal' flickers through conversations. Yes we will test social distancing, query the need or not for face masks when in public or dare we gather in groups of more than two or from different households but there is perhaps more than these practical issues to be discussed as we reflect on other phenomena that have remerged during these past weeks, even months or perhaps longer but un-noticed. In and amongst all the new skills we've learned, changes in the way we have kept going and now wonder which we will hang onto and which we will let go again, there is a risk we could sweep under the figurative carpet as being a glitch or inconsequential but though this difficult period physical uncertainty has also raised spiritual uncertainty in many. Questions on the purpose of life and how life might be lived have again pushed their way to the forefront of thinking and can be seen in the increase in folk seeking spiritual support or comfort, attending on-line services, sometimes on the other side of the world, whereas previously going to church one block over just didn't seem to have any relevance. So as I emerge into this potential new spring of normality I find myself reflecting on how am I to act as I reengage on a personal level with those around me and those I might meet across the internet if exchanges like ours today continue?

Then into my musings, as often happens, the lectionary authors present scriptures that cause a deep intake of breath and a long 'ohhh.....' as the penny rolls around if not actually dropping.

The reading from Acts has the apostle Paul in Athens - centre of philosophy that shaped how the world considered things then as much as it has Western thinkers, if not all the world, over the centuries since. As he wanders around the city, Paul finds evidence of religious devotion everywhere; devotion to all kinds of different gods and all kinds of different faiths. He concludes that the people of Athens are a very religiously minded people and, as if to confirm the impression, he is invited to meet with the Areopagus, a council of the most respected and distinguished thinkers in a city of thinkers, and to explain to them what his faith is all about.

Peter, in his first letter as we have it in our bible, writing to the early church, tells them (and us) that when we are given the opportunity to speak about our faith, we should do so "readily and with gentleness and respect". Readily yes but gentleness and respect are not perhaps how we think of Paul's teaching techniques – more likely sharp and to the point in his directions might be the first phrases to cross our minds when asked to describe his style. But it is with Gentleness and Respect how he approached his opportunity to speak to those with influence and who would have had the attention of those with power at the time. Beginning by affirming the Athenians for their keen interest in religion Paul quotes approvingly from two of their own respected poets. And far from telling them that has got it all wrong, he links his message directly to things he has observed in their own religious practice. He had found a shrine in the city dedicated to "the unknown god", and so he begins by suggesting that the faith he is there to preach is not something strange and new, but rather it is the missing knowledge of a faith that is already within their experience.

Good marketing or speaking with integrity about deep truths concerning the nature of God and of God's attention on the world? Quoting from the Greek poet Epimenides, "In God we live and move and have our being." Paul simply states that no one, regardless of what they might or might not believe, is entirely cut off from God and removed from the influence of God. Something that perhaps our hard wiring brings to the surface during times such as the current pandemic, causing folk to search for understanding in places they might not have considered otherwise. To live, to move, to be; all is surrounded by God and underpinned by God. A person's ability to walk across the room is as dependent on God as it is dependent on the oxygen that they breathe. More, Paul specifically says that although God wants to be sought out by us, he is not hiding but is not far from anyone - is within reach of everyone.

Recognising that the spiritual endeavours of people of any faith or none are genuine attempts to reach out to God Paul is saying that God does not refuse their advances and nor insist that they get their doctrines punctuation period accurate before having anything to do with them. But, says Paul, once you are aware of the alternatives, God does call you to make a choice to get your life on God's track, reflecting what we heard Jesus say in the gospel reading when he made what some would see as exclusive sounding statement that the world cannot receive the Holy Spirit, because it neither sees nor knows the Spirit, but that the disciples can and do. Both are saying that there is something confronting about the gospel made known in Christ, something that demands a tough choice, something that does not simply allow people to add a bit of Christian faith to their lives and leave everything else unchanged. The demands of Christian discipleship will not be domesticated to fit "the world".

As we emerge from the strange times of coronavirus management where does that leave us in our view of those dipping their toes in spiritual waters today, joining on the side-lines of worship often far from their home base?

Paul's speech asserts that there are people who do not know anything about Christ who are nevertheless reaching out for God and responding to God. And he implies that we cannot, "take" Christ to them, because Christ is already among them. In God they

live and move and have their being. This really should not come as any great surprise to us. We believe in a God who takes the initiative and comes to us while we are still set on our own ways and unwilling to change. We believe in a God who takes flesh among us, who embodied himself in places where he may not be welcomed. We believe in a God who is present in ordinary things, in bread and wine and water, reaching out to us and asking us to offer ourselves in return. So it should be no great surprise to us that this God who is not far from anyone is present among people, wherever they may be spiritually, reaching out to them in the ordinary things around them. And in seeing this I suggest we need to listen first and learn what Christ has been doing among them before asserting the claims of our own imperfect understanding over theirs.

I am sure that all of us — those who know the story of Christ and those who don't — will come closer to the truth and to understanding what God is calling us to as we listen to one another and allow one another's stories of grace to reveal God to us and challenge us to offer ourselves more fully into the hands of God.

For us it begins here in our liturgy, encountering the risen Christ in the word spoken and the bread broken, and as we do might we learn to recognise him in places ever more strange and foreign? Even, perhaps, in a Zoom conference call or through the Face Book live stream?

Henri Nouwen said that "when we have met our Lord in the silent intimacy of our prayer, then we will also meet him in the camp, in the market, and in the town square. But when we have not met him in the centre of our own hearts, we cannot expect to meet him in the busyness of our daily lives." So as we encounter the Christ here, let us gently step out of lock-down ready to acknowledge and celebrate Christ wherever and in whoever we encounter him, and to allow that recognition to call us and others to offer ourselves, ever more fully and consciously, into the hands of God and the support of our neighbours. If we have all in common in our search for God, let us not allow language to divide us or be the thing that separates us. As we go out let our focus not be to take Christ to others, but to meet Christ among them and reconnect his story with theirs through the example of ours.

God bide wi ye loones and quines.

## **Acts 17 (In the Doric tongue)**

Noo, as Paul was wytin for them in Athens he wis sair come att tae see foo e hale toon wis foo o idols. Sae he argied aboot it wi e Jowes I the synagogue, wi e god-fearin Gintiles an aiven at e mart wi e fowk passin by. Some o the Epicurean and Stoic clivver chiefs fell in wi him, an some o them said, "Fit's iss chiel bleeterin on aboot?" Ithers sais "A think he's tryin tae tell hiz aboot some new kine o god," cause he wis preachin aboot Jesus and e resurrection. Sae they teuk him and bricht him afore their Council, the Areopagus, speirin at him, "Kin ye tell hiz fit iss new learnin ye're spikkin o is an aboot? Ye're fessing gey queer things tae wir lugs and we're seekin tae fin oot fit's e meanin o't." (Ye see, aa the Athenians an e forriners fa were there were aye oot tae spik aboot or hear about onythin at wis new.)

Syne Paul steed up afore e Council an said, "Men o Athens, A can see ye're aa verra releegious. As A wis makkin ma wye here an leukin at e things ye wirship, A saw an aaltar fit said 'Tae e God Fa Naebody Kens'. Iss is e god te're wirshippin in yer feelness at a'm here tae preach till ye aboot. God, fa made e warl an aathin inno't, bein e Lord o baith hivven an earth, disna bide in kirkies made in human hans, not is he wirshippt bi human hans, as tho he needed onythin – seein he's e een gies tae aa fowk. Life an breath an aa ither thing. He creatit ilka clan fae the ae forebeer, tae bide aaower e hale warl. He's wirkit oot fan they are gyan tae live and far they are gyan tae bide, sae they mith seek God, in e hope they mith feel for him and come onno him, tho he's nae verra far fae ony o's. Aye it's in him we live an meeve an hiv wir verra existence. Some o ye rain poets hiv said 'there's nae doobt we're his bairns'. Sae than, ginwe be God's bairns, we maunna think on God lik bein gowd or siller or steen shapit bi skeely hans o men. God his owerleukit e tiems o ignorance an noo cries on aa men tae repint. Ye see, he's set a day fan he'll jeedge e ahle warl, an jeedge richt gait, bi a chiel o his choisin. He's gien preef o iss tae aa, bi resin him fae e deid."

Fan they heard aboot e resin fae e deid, some o them leuch at him, bit ithers said, "We'd like tae hear ye spik mair aboot iss some ither time" Sae Paul held awa fae amo them. Bit some did jine wi him an turnt belivers, een o them bein Dionysius een o e Councillers o the Aeropagus, a wumman ca'ed Damaris and a fyow ithers tee.