

“THAT OLD TIME RELIGION”

“Three Challenges to the Cross”

Scripture Reading – Acts, 17:16-34

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the market-place day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbler trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods”. They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean”. (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: ‘TO AN UNKNOWN GOD’. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring’.

“Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by man’s design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.”

When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject”. At that, Paul left the Council. A few men became followers of Paul and believed.

“There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God – having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.”

II Timothy, 3:1b-5, NIV

This series, based on THE BOOK OF ACTS, is entitled ‘THAT OLD TIME RELIGION’.

The reason I want to call this series ‘THAT OLD TIME RELIGION’ is that we need to look back in order that we might really look to the future. The OLD TIME RELIGION needs to become the NEW TIME RELIGION because it is the ALL TIME RELIGION. If we get back to the basics of life in the Christian Church, we might better understand what the Holy Spirit can do through us today.

THE BOOK OF ACTS is the story of success; the story of a church triumphant.

It is the story of a small group of uncultured and generally unlearned people with meagre resources – very little money, no prestige, and no church buildings. This small group of people went out to tell the story of a publicly executed Jew. They went out against three obstacles – the imperial might of the Romans, the intellectual sophistication of the Greeks, and the religious bigotry of the Jews. They turned the world inside out and upside down for Jesus Christ.

The Acts of the Apostles is the story of a church on fire with evangelism and growth...

“THREE CHALLENGES TO THE CROSS”

We skip forward in ACTS and join Paul on his missionary journey in Athens.

Athens was in a period of decline during this time, although it was still recognised as a centre of culture and education. The glory of its politics and commerce had long since faded, so it was not the influential city it had once been. Although Athens had a famous university and numerous beautiful buildings, the city was now given over to a cultured paganism that was nourished by idolatry, novelty, and philosophy.

Athens was one of the most beautiful cities ever built.

We today admire Greek sculpture and architecture as beautiful works of art, but in Paul’s day, much of this was directly associated with false pagan religion. When Paul walked down the streets of the city he saw things, heard things, and felt things that stirred him to the depths of his heart and soul. When he saw people peddling false religion – dope for the soul – he was grieved. The Bible uses the word ‘PAROXYSM’ which means he was ‘STIRRED TO ANGER’.

Paul arrived in the great city of Athens, not as a sightseer, but as a soul-winner.

When he walked the streets of Athens, Paul met with three challenges to the cross. Paul met with SUPERSTITIOUS IDOLATRY, STUBBORN BIGOTRY, and SOPHISTICATED PHILOSOPHY. When you walk down the streets of any large city, you will meet those same three challenges. We are going to look at how Paul met with, and overcame, these challenges, because you can use his example. In doing so, you will discover that THE BOOK OF ACTS is not mere ancient history; it is more up-to-date than tomorrow’s newspaper!

1. SUPERSTITIOUS IDOLATRY

‘While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.’

Acts, 17:16, NIV

When you walk around Malton & Norton on Derwent, do you see any idols?

Perhaps you are tempted to say that there are no idols on our streets. Sometimes we just cannot see that our town – and sometimes our churches and corps – are full of idols.

What is an idol?

An idol is anyone or anything that you love more than God. An idol is anyone or anything that you serve more than God. An idol is anyone or anything that you fear more than God. An idol is anyone or anything that you trust more than God. An idol is anyone or anything that you worship instead of God. Therefore, if there is anyone or anything that you love, serve, fear, trust, or worship more than God – then you are an idolater, and guilty of breaking God’s law.

Jesus said, “SEEK FIRST HIS KINGDOM AND HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS” (Matthew, 6:33).

Not second, not third, not fourth – but “SEEK FIRST HIS KINGDOM AND HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS”.

God created mankind to be incurably religious.

Because men and women are made in the image of God, they have deep inside their hearts a God shaped vacuum that must be filled. Whatever they choose to fill it with, is what they will worship. Every person will worship – but if they do not worship the one true God, they will worship a false god.

The Athenians had over thirty thousand gods.

Someone said that it was easier to meet a god on the streets of Athens than it was to meet a man! Paul was greatly distressed when he saw their gods of stone, stick and straw.

THEY WORSHIPPED THE GOD MAMMON

Mammon is the god of wealth, the god of possessions.

We know that some people today are committed to riches; they are committed to wealth; they are committed to success; they are committed to achievement. Of course, there is nothing wrong with riches in themselves, but if you love riches more than God then you serve the god Mammon.

Do people worship the god Mammon today?

Of course they do! **Aristotle Onasis**, the wealthy Greek shipping magnate, said “ALL THAT MATTERS IN THIS LIFE IS MONEY; IT IS THE PEOPLE WITH MONEY WHO ARE ROYALTY IN OUR GENERATION”. If that is all that matters – then he was an idolater. When he died, he died bitter and broken because his god had failed him. Far from being an ancient god, Mammon is still with us today.

THEY WORSHIPPED THE GOD BACCHUS

Bacchus is the god of wine, the god of liquor.

In Lebanon, for example, there was a magnificent temple built to the god of wine. Its ruins can still be seen today in the town of Baalbak. Because people liked their drink, they made a god out of him. The Athenians too worshipped the god Bacchus.

Do people worship the god Bacchus today?

Of course they do! Millions of pounds are spent paying homage to this god. Bacchus has his temples on every street corner, and people go in to worship him through debauchery, drink, and drugs. Far from being an ancient god, Bacchus is still with us today.

THEY WORSHIPPED THE GOD VENUS

Venus, or Aphrodite, is the god of sex.

She stands for lust and licentiousness. In ancient days, they actually had temples where people would go in and commit acts of fornication and adultery in worship to this god. These real temples had male and female temple prostitutes to satisfy your every sexual whim and fantasy. In fact, the Bible tells us that Judah (Jacob’s son) had sex with Tamar believing she was a Canaanite shrine prostitute (see **Genesis, 38:21**).

Incidentally, the Bible uses the phrase ‘HOLY WOMAN’ to describe her – obviously, it does not refer to her actions or her character as holy!

Do people worship the god Venus, or Aphrodite today?

Of course they do! The Playboy Empire, for example, has been built to satisfy her and her followers’ desires. The number one use for the World Wide Web is for sexual pleasure. If you type in the name of any person, you will find internet sites that seek to offer you nude pictures. Racy ‘Lads Mags’ may be moved to top shelves of supermarkets because of their sexually related content. Far from being an ancient god, Venus is still with us today.

THEY WORSHIPPED THE GOD SOPHIA

Sophia is the god of learning – from her we get the word ‘SOPHISTICATED’.

The reality is that we think of gods like this as quiet honourable. After all, it is important for people to learn and use that knowledge wisely. However, there are great universities of learning where the universal truths of the God of the Bible are never spoken. For some, their bible is the science textbook. Their salvation is the inevitable progress of mankind. Their heaven is the utopia that they hope to eventually create.

Do people worship the god Sophia today?

Of course they do! People can take degrees in Theology at our universities and pass the course without any reference to God at all. Whilst mankind gets sophisticated and proud of our wisdom, we still have no answer to a world ravaged by terrorism, war or the disease of AIDS. Far from being an ancient god, Sophia is still with us today.

THEY WORSHIPPED THE GOD MARS

Mars is the god of war, the god of revenge.

The Areopagus Council that Paul addressed met together on Mars Hill.

Do people worship the god Mars today?

Of course they do! People hijack aeroplanes in the name of their god Allah but pay homage to Mars as they slam them into high rise towers. If you watch television today and compare it with programmes from the past, you will quickly notice the increase in violence. Any time you are out driving, you have to be careful because there are those who exhibit 'Road Rage'. In supermarkets, folk have 'Trolley Rage'. People seem quick to temper – and even quicker to shed blood. Far from being an ancient god, Mars is still with us today.

Paul met with superstitious idolatry in his day – and we will too.

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God.”

Exodus, 20:2-5a, NIV

2. STUBBORN BIGOTRY

‘So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the market-place day by day with those who happened to be there.’

Acts, 17:17, NIV

Stubborn bigotry is not superstitious idolatry, but it is just as hard to deal with.

The Jews and God-fearing Greeks that Paul met with would have quickly looked down their noses at those who committed idolatry. They would not entertain the notion of worshipping gods of stone, stick and straw. They were religious monotheist people who believed in the one true God – YHWH – and had the Scriptures – The Old Testament – to give witness to them.

Paul went into the synagogue to preach to them Jesus Christ.

Would these people hear what Paul had to say? They would not! They were so sure they were right and he was wrong. They reverted to type by becoming what the Bible calls 'STIFF NECKED PEOPLE'. They did not want to hear how Paul had once been like them, but after a meeting with Jesus, he could prove that Jesus was the Christ.

How can we tell they were full of stubborn religious bigotry?

Simple! The entire Old Testament is about Jesus Christ. Every time you turn the page, Jesus Christ is there. In the Law you can see Jesus. In the Tabernacle you can see Jesus. In the Levitical Offerings you can see Jesus. In the Temple you can see Jesus. In the Psalms you can see Jesus. In the Prophets you can see Jesus. The whole Bible is full of Jesus – and it points people to him, but did they believe that Jesus was the Christ? Not for one moment!

‘Jesus said, “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.”’

John, 5:39-40, NIV

Paul reasoned with the Jews and God-fearing Greeks.

The Bible uses the word 'DIALOGOS' from which we get the word 'DIALOGUE' and it means 'TO DISCUSS AND DISPUTE'. Paul told them the Gospel, but rather than being open to his persuasive argument, their minds were closed and their hearts were hardened to the truth. They were fine as they were. They could say that they were not pagans; they had their own religion, thank you!

Most people you meet have to turn from religion to Jesus Christ.

Remember that it was a religious crowd that cried out for Jesus to be crucified. One of the hardest groups of people to win for Christ are those who do not and cannot see their need for a Saviour and salvation. People like what is familiar to them; they do not want to have their settled views or beliefs challenged – especially if they are wrong!

Even in the church, some people have a sign around their neck: 'DO NOT DISTURB'.

Paul met with this kind of opposition to the Gospel of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

3. SOPHISTICATED PHILOSOPHY

‘A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbling trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods”. They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.’

Acts, 17:18, NIV

A 'PHILOSOPHER' is someone who is 'FOND OF WISE THINGS'.

A 'PHILOSOPHER' is literally a 'LOVER OF WISDOM', and as such, he takes pride in his learning. Someone has said: "A PHILOSOPHER IS SOMEBODY WHO TELLS US WHAT WE ALREADY KNOW, IN WORDS WE CANNOT UNDERSTAND". Bertrand Russell said: "PHILOSOPHY IS A WASHOUT TO ME. IT IS A DEAD END ROAD AT THE END OF NINETY YEARS". A philosopher has the love of wisdom without the love of God. Unfortunately, being men of wisdom does not stop their foolishness preventing them from coming to Jesus.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE EPICUREANS

Epicurus lived about 300 years before Jesus Christ.

He was a teacher, a brilliant man, who made Athens his home. He said, "JUST MAKE YOURSELF COMFORTABLE. BE AS COMFORTABLE AS YOU CAN. GET AS MUCH PLEASURE AS YOU CAN. LIVE FOR PLEASURE". When Epicurus said this he was a farmer, so he viewed the good life as growing fruit and vegetables. By the time of Paul, his followers believed that the pursuit of pleasure was the beginning and end of all things.

Epicureans believed that everything happened by chance.

They believed that death was the end of all. They believed that the gods were remote from the world and did not care. They believed that pleasure was the chief end of man.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE STOICS

The stoics were the disciples of Zeno, who taught from a 'STOICK', a porch.

The Stoics rejected the idolatry of pagan worship and taught that there was one World God. They were pantheists, and their emphasis was on personal discipline and self control. Pleasure was not good and pain was not evil. The most important thing in life was to follow one's reason and be self-sufficient, unmoved by inner feelings or outward circumstances. Of course, such a philosophy only fanned the flames of pride and taught men that they did not need the help of God.

The Epicureans said "ENJOY LIFE!" and the Stoics said "ENDURE LIFE!" but it remained for Paul to explain how they could 'ENTER INTO LIFE' through faith in God's risen Son...

"HOW DID PAUL RESPOND TO THE CHALLENGES TO THE CROSS?"

Paul shared some basic truths about God which led to some people being saved...

THE GREATNESS OF GOD: THE LORD CREATED YOU!

"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands."

Acts, 17:24, NIV

Where did I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going?

Science attempts to answer the first question, and philosophy wrestles with the second; but only the Christian faith has a satisfactory answer to all three. The Epicureans said that all was matter and matter always was. The Stoics said that everything was 'God' – the Spirit of the Universe. God did not create anything – he only organised matter and impressed on it some law and order.

Paul boldly affirmed, "IN THE BEGINNING, GOD CREATED THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH".

God made the world and everything in it, and he is Lord of all that he has made. He is not a distant God, divorced from his creation; nor is he an imprisoned God, locked in creation. He is too great to be housed in man-made temples, but he is not too great to be concerned about man's needs. I wonder how the Council members reacted to Paul's statement about temples, for right there on the Acropolis were several shrines dedicated to Athena.

THE GOVERNMENT OF GOD: THE LORD CONTROLS YOU!

"From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live."

Acts, 17:26, NIV

The God of Creation is also the God of history and the God of geography.

The gods of the Greeks were distant beings who had no concern for the problems and needs of men. But Paul said that God created mankind 'FROM ONE MAN' so that all nations are made of the same stuff and have the same blood. The Greeks felt that they were a

special race, different from other nations; but Paul affirmed otherwise. Even their precious land that they revered came as a gift from God. It is not the power of man, but the government of God, that determines the rise and fall of nations.

God is not a distant deity: 'HE IS NOT FAR FROM EACH ONE OF US' (Acts, 17:27).

Therefore, men ought to seek God and come to know him in truth. Here Paul quoted from the poet Epimenides: 'FOR IN HIM WE LIVE AND MOVE AND HAVE OUR BEING'. Then he added a quotation from two poets, Aratus and Cleanthes: 'WE ARE HIS OFFSPRING'. Paul was affirming the natural Fatherhood of God, for man was created in the image of God.

God made us in his image, so it is foolish for us to make gods in our own image.

Greek religion was nothing but the manufacture and worship of gods who were patterned after men, and who acted like men. Paul not only showed the folly of temples and the temple rituals, but also the folly of all idolatry.

THE GRACE OF GOD: THE LORD CONVICTS YOU!

"God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us."

Acts, 17:27, NIV

To conclude, Paul summarised the clear evidences of God's grace.

For centuries, God was patient with man's sin and ignorance. This does not mean, of course, that men were not guilty, but only that God held back his divine wrath. In due time, God sent a Saviour, and now he commands all men to repent of their foolish ways. This Saviour was killed and then raised from the dead, and one day, he will return to judge the world. The proof that he will judge is that he was raised from the dead.

Most members of the Athenian Council could not accept the Resurrection.

To a Greek, the body was only a prison; and the sooner a person left his body, the happier he would be. Why raise a dead body and live in it again? And why would God bother with a personal judgment of each man? This kind of teaching was definitely incompatible with Greek philosophy. They believed in immortality, but not in resurrection.

What was the result of Paul's preaching?

"When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject". At that, Paul left the Council. A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.'

Acts, 17:32-34, NIV

SOME SNEERED	You cannot make a comedy out of every decision in life.
SOME DELAYED	It is far too easy to wait until tomorrow to do something.
SOME BELIEVED	The wise man knows that only the fool will reject God's offer.

When you tell people about Jesus and the resurrection, you should expect similar responses!