

**New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario**  
**Sunday, June 12, 2016**  
**Rev. Andrew Reid**  
**Acts 17:16-34**  
**“Debate in Athens”**

Pity poor St Paul. Wherever he went, trouble seemed to seek him out. In 2 Corinthians 11, he listed all the trials and tribulations that he had endured on his missionary travels up to that point: labours, imprisonments, countless floggings; on five separate times, the forty lashes minus one; three times beaten with rods; once stoned; three times shipwrecked; adrift at sea for a night and a day; in danger from rivers, bandits, his own people, and Gentiles; in danger in the city, in the wilderness, at sea, and from false brothers and sisters; toil, hardship, and many sleepless nights; he had been hungry, thirsty, cold and naked. He was not boasting about all that, or presenting his experience as something everyone should strive for. Rather, *I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong* 2 Corinthians 12:10.

Pity poor Paul. Or maybe more accurately, pity the poor companions of Paul. Because whatever happened to Paul, they were caught up in it as well. We saw last week what happened in Thessalonica. Paul and Silas arrived there, and went to the synagogue, where Paul argued with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that Jesus was the Messiah. Some of the people who heard him in the synagogue were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas. And so did people who were not born part of the Jewish community of the city – *a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women* Acts 17:4.

Which resulted in a mob searching the city for Paul and Silas to bring them out to the assembly. And when they couldn't find them, Jason and some believers, Paul's companions, were dragged before the city authorities. Paul and Silas, in the meantime, were spirited off to safety by the believers, and sent to the town of Beroea.

And the same thing happened there: they went to the synagogue, they preached the good news, people in the synagogue were receptive and *welcomed the message very eagerly and examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so*. And as in Thessalonica, not a few Greek women and men of high standing came to believe. *But when the Jews in Thessalonica learned that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Beroea as well, they came there too, to stir up and incite the crowds* Acts 17:11-13.

So once again, the believers took action to protect Paul. They immediately sent him away, leaving Silas and Timothy behind. Paul was sent first to the coast and then to Athens, where he left instructions that Silas and Timothy were to join him.

Which brings us to the start of today's text, and Paul doing it all over again. Deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols, he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons. Acts 17:17-18 say that he also took it out of the synagogue onto the streets, and argued in the market-place with those who happened to be there, even engaging with some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers.

Some were sceptical and called him a babbler, but the difference is that this time, he didn't find himself having to run and hide for safety. This time, other people listened to what he had to say, and gave it careful consideration, and in the best traditions of Greek philosophy, wanted to engage him in debate.

So they brought him to the Areopagus, and the way St Luke tells it, that's when the debate really began. The Areopagus was the area of Athens where the city council once met. It was no longer the legal and

judicial centre it once was, though some legal matters were still settled there. But Luke paints a different scene in Acts 17. The Oxford Companion to the Bible puts it this way:

The author of Acts has created an idealized scene of Athenian life, based upon stock motifs of Athenian topography, culture, and history, intended especially to recall the trial of Socrates. In this scene, Paul has been cast as a latter-day Socrates who discloses the true identity and plans of the unknown God to the listening gentiles.

One of the most interesting points about this story is how differently Paul goes about the task of preaching the Gospel in Athens. In the synagogues in Thessalonica and Beroea, he started with Scripture. Of course that was maybe only to be expected in those places, since he was preaching in synagogues. But my point is that his audience in those places was made up primarily of people of the Jewish faith. Or at least, as in the case of the devout Greeks, they were people sympathetic to and knowledgeable about the Jewish faith. So Paul started his preaching from the scriptures that lay at the heart of the Jewish faith.

In Thessalonica, he argued, explained and proved *from the scriptures* Acts 17:2. In Beroea, people *examined the scriptures every day* in search of evidence to support what he was saying – Acts 17:11. In both places, he started where people were, and led them from there to belief and to faith in Jesus Christ.

And he did the same in Athens – that is, he started where people were, and led them from there to belief in the Gospel and to faith in Jesus Christ. Only this time, his starting point was not the Scriptures of the Jewish faith. This time, he started in the traditions and practices of Greek philosophical inquiry and debate.

He started out by getting to know his audience. This was almost certainly Paul's first time in Athens. It is certainly the first time Luke talks about him being in Athens. So Paul took the time to get to know the place. He told the Athenians how he went through the city, how he looked carefully at the objects of worship in the city, and how he saw how extremely religious they were in every way. So religious were they in every way that he had even found an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god."

And *what ... you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you* Acts 17:23. He went on to talk about the God who made the world and everything in it, the Lord of heaven and earth; the God who gives life and breath to all mortals, who does not live in shrines made by human hands, and who is not served by human hands. And he concludes by quoting Greek authorities. The footnotes in the Oxford Annotated Bible say that the words "In him we live and move and have our being" are attributed to either the 6th century BC philosopher-poet Epimenides or the 2nd century BC poet Posidonius, and that the words "For we too are his offspring" are attributed to the 3rd century BC poet Aratus.

Paul knew his audience. He learned how they thought and lived. He understood the culture in which they lived and on which they built their society. And he engaged with that culture to make a direct connection between people in the market place and on the Areopagus, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In his commentary on this passage in *Feasting on the Word*, Randle R. Mixon writes this:

... Paul was not a systematic theologian. Though surely a mind of great wit and intelligence, of wisdom and understanding, his primary calling was as an evangelist. His task was to spread the good news, and he was comfortable adapting his message to his audience. Above all, he was concerned to be heard and understood.

And that may just be what lies at the heart of what we believe about New St James: that God is calling the people of New St James, as followers of Jesus Christ, to worship God and to serve the community.