

Acts 17:22-34 – Making Connections

In this series of sermons we have been seeking to learn how we may share the good news of Jesus with others. Today we are looking at "Making Connections" – how we may make connections with the things that concern those around us and open up conversations that may provide us with opportunities to talk of how the things we believe have relevance to the lives of others.

Paul's witness in Athens

Paul was on his own in Athens. He had been forced to leave Thessalonica and Berea in a hurry as opponents had stirred up riots against his preaching and his life was threatened. He had left behind Silas and Timothy, his co-workers, instructing them to encourage the churches but then to join up with him as soon as possible.

Paul had been walking around the city of Athens – this great centre of learning and debate in ancient Greece. He was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he began to tell others the good news about Jesus – the one who had come to reveal the character of the living God. He spoke of Jesus death and of how his resurrection was the only hope for the world suffering under the universal reign of death.

He quickly became involved in debate and dispute with the various philosophical schools in the city. They hauled him off to a meeting of the Areopagus – the ancient court of the city where disputes would be settled. And there Paul was invited to defend his beliefs.

Paul defends his views

Paul begins with something he had noticed in their city. He had observed their many and varied objects of worship which suggested a preoccupation with gods and with religion. And among all these he had noticed an altar which bore the inscription, "To an unknown god". Perhaps whoever had commissioned it was simply hedging their bets, setting up this altar in case they had omitted honouring a god whom they had not yet heard of. Or perhaps they had some sense that there was a supreme God behind the various gods they worshipped, one who possessed all power but who was quite beyond their imagination – a God who was unknowable.

Paul declares, "What you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you."

He then speaks to them of the almighty Creator God who made the world and everything in it. Such a God does not live in temples made by hands nor does he need anything that human beings can make for him. He is the one who has created us: he is the one who gives you your breath.

But you must not think that this God is far off and completely unknowable; he is not far off from each one of us – as one of your own poets has said. He is a God who invites us to search for him. More than that, he has come and sought us out, coming to dwell among us in Jesus. He is a God who has made himself known.

So Paul urges his learned listeners to turn away from their foolish idols to worship the living and true God who has revealed himself in the Lord Jesus Christ. God may have overlooked their superstitions in the past but there is no longer any excuse for idolatry: Jesus has made God known. Paul urges them to repent of their folly and seek God's forgiveness. No doubt he also spoke to them of Jesus' sacrifice on their behalf as the basis of that forgiveness.

Paul tells them that this Jesus has been raised from the dead and has been appointed by God as the one before whom all the world must stand in judgment. This will happen in the day of his return when all who have died will be raised bodily from their graves and all humanity will stand before his throne. Then at last, all creation will be put to rights and God's reign of justice will be established.

Paul's words divided his hearers – especially his teaching about the resurrection. Many mocked what he said. They could have understood him if he had promised some form of disembodied life of the human spirit or soul beyond death, but they thought the notion of bodily resurrection crude

and absurd. Others, however, wanted to hear more – including Dionysius, one of the members of the Areopagus.

Our witness in Bristol

The challenge for us this morning is, how are we going to tell the people we meet – the people of our city, our contemporary society – about Jesus?

1. We need to be clear about our message

We need to be clear about the message we have to communicate.

This universe, and we ourselves, are not the products of chance. There is a God, an almighty God, who created it all and who has given purpose to it all.

This God has not left us in ignorance concerning himself but has revealed himself in the Lord Jesus Christ. He has revealed himself as a God who loves and cares all that he has made – who loves and cares for us and seeks us out.

We are conscious that we live in a world gone wrong – it is not the world it ought to be nor the world that God created it to be.

Jesus came into this world to put it right. He bore the weight of its brokenness, alienation and rebellion – took all that weight upon himself in his sacrificial death upon the cross. He, the creator, was broken by his broken world.

By his resurrection from the dead he broke the power of evil and defeated death. He is the beginning of the new creation in which we, and every part of creation, will be made anew – remade to be all that God intended it to be.

It's a big message.

It's a message of hope for the world.

It's good news.

2. We need to notice the world around us

We need to be alert to what is going on in society around us – just as Paul noticed that inscription "To an unknown god".

What are people around us concerned about and talking about?

We need then to ask how the message of the gospel addresses these issues.

Thinking about these questions enables us to speak to people in ways that connect to them – speaking into the issues that are on their minds – scratching them where they are itching.

3. Here's one suggestion

Let me suggest one issue that we might use to connect to people this week – by all means watch out for other issues you may come across this week or in the weeks ahead. The extinction rebellion movement plans to disrupt traffic in central Bristol this week. I don't know how you feel about that, but it's likely to be a topic of conversation in our city.

How does the big message of God's purposes in Christ connect with this issue?

Greta Thunberg, a 16 year old teenager from Sweden made the headlines around Europe by speaking eloquently about the dangers of climate change produced by our indulgent and thoughtless lifestyles. She spoke of the way that climate change will impact children growing up today. She was critical of the lack of urgent action by governments to address these issues. She successfully encouraged many children to join her in her "strike for the climate" protest.

But she has also encouraged adults to join the protests.

Extinctions rebellion is an expression of that protest against the dangers of climate change and the inactivity of government. In particular, the movement is coming to Bristol in response to reports of

the poor air quality in parts of central Bristol which is leading to many children suffering from asthma and other chest complaints. By their protests they are seeking to highlight the issue and to get governments and councils to act now.

What can we say into this situation?

Does the good news of the Lord Jesus have anything relevant to say to this issue?

I suggest that it does.

This is God's world: a world that he made to reflect his glory and be the source of blessing to all that he had made; a world that he entrusted to our care.

We have made a mess of it and are still making a mess of it. We need to repent concerning the damage we are doing to God's world and we need to change our ways.

We need also to speak of Jesus, whose resurrection from the dead gives hope for a world made new and whose life in us compels us to work now for the healing and care of God's creation.

We need to connect with what is on people's minds this week and to show how the things we believe – God's word to us in the Lord Jesus – is relevant to them.

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