

6th Wednesday of Easter 2021

Acts 17:15, 22—18:1

After Paul's escorts had taken him to Athens, they came away with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.

Then Paul stood up at the Areopagus and said: "You Athenians, I see that in every respect you are very religious. For as I walked around looking carefully at your shrines, I even discovered an altar inscribed, 'To an Unknown God.'

What therefore you unknowingly worship, I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and all that is in it, the Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in sanctuaries made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands because he needs anything.

Rather it is he who gives to everyone life and breath and everything. He made from one the whole human race to dwell on the entire surface of the earth, and he fixed the ordered seasons and the boundaries of their regions, so that people might seek God, even perhaps grope for him and find him, though indeed he is not far from any one of us.

For 'In him we live and move and have our being,' as even some of your poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.'

Since therefore we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the divinity is like an image fashioned from gold, silver, or stone by human art and imagination.

God has overlooked the times of ignorance, but now he demands that all people everywhere repent because he has established a day on which he will 'judge the world with justice' through a man he has appointed, and he has provided confirmation for all by raising him from the dead."

When they heard about resurrection of the dead, some began to scoff, but others said, "We should like to hear you on this some other time." And so Paul left them.

But some did join him, and became believers. Among them were Dionysius, a member of the Court of the Areopagus, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

After this he left Athens and went to Corinth.

John 16:12-15

Jesus said to his disciples:

"I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now.

But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth.

He will not speak on his own,

but he will speak what he hears,

and will declare to you the things that are coming.

He will glorify me,

because he will take from what is mine and declare it to you.

Everything that the Father has is mine;

for this reason I told you that he will take from what is mine

and declare it to you."



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What therefore you unknowingly worship, I proclaim to you.

So, here is St. Paul in the middle of Athens. While the Mediterranean world is ruled politically and militarily by Rome, Athens is still revered as the classical and philosophical center of their civilization. St. Paul has taken his preaching to the center of the city where all the philosophers and their students gather for engaging discourse, learning and disputation.

Here, St. Paul provides us with an excellent model for evangelization. This is an encounter between the word of the gospel and the world it is destined to transform.ⁱ

In our evangelization, may we usher transformation, may we provide an encounter between the Word and the world around us. Let us see in St. Paul a model to follow.

I ask you to read Acts 17: 15, 22-18:1 (<https://bible.usccb.org/bible/readings/051221.cfm>). I would like to go through it to learn how we are to lead people to Jesus, our Lord and Savior. I rely heavily on the commentary by Rev. Luke Timothy Johnson, one of my professors at Notre Dame.ⁱⁱ

What about St. Paul should I imitate?

St. Paul finds himself in Athens waiting for his fellow missionaries to begin the next leg of their trip. What does he do with this down time? He goes to the synagogue to debate with the Jews. He goes to the city square to expound to anyone who will hear. He goes to the Areopagus, where he discourses with the esteemed philosophers of the time.

What do I do with my down time? Where do I go? And you?

Paul does not start out by condemning the pagans. He does not call them a “brood of vipers” like John the Baptist did in challenging the Pharisees (Mt 3:7). Paul is gracious and eloquent building his discourse on common ground. He compliments them on a shared respect for the religious. He builds on their shared desire in seeking God, to grope for him and to find him. St. Paul is presenting the face of God, the face of Jesus, of whom they are all ignorant. This seems to be a “new teaching”. They are curious.

St. Paul grounds his presentation in something of which they are already aware: their own Athenian shrine dedicated to the Unknown God. St. Paul sets about to make that god known to them. In fact, the Unknown God is not another god, he is the sole creator of the universe, the father of all humankind.

St. Paul connects with what the people know and establishes that he has a common relationship with them; he is one of them.

Am I gracious to those whom I engage? Do I find common ground? Do I establish a relationship? And you?

St. Paul has captured his audience’s attention. They are civil, polite and academically curious. They are ready to hear the gospel.

St. Paul then preaches the kerygma, the proclamation of salvation through Jesus Christ.ⁱⁱⁱ He calls for repentance.

Now listen, my Christian friends, and you friends of mine who are not Christian: have you noticed that Christians believe a number of wonderful and fantastic doctrines? I mean, it’s easy to understand, *“Do to others whatever you would have them do to you.”* (Mt 7:12) This is known as the Golden Rule and most religions have something analogous.

But, St. Paul didn’t even get to things such as virgin birth, feeding thousands with mere scraps, and raising people from the dead. It was at the mention of the judge of humankind being resurrected from the dead that people scoffed and mocked him. Some, more diplomatically, replied that they would like to take up the discourse again, later.

These people were poised to receive the liberation of their souls and a hope for eternal paradise. But then they took a pass and went on to their destiny, a destiny assured by their

rejection of Jesus. One trusts in God's mercy for them and the fact that God provides thousands of "second chances". I know that I count on that.

As I go to share the wonderful and fantastic story of Jesus' paschal mystery, do I get frustrated when my hearer thinks I'm crazy, that I make no rational sense? Have you felt that frustration?

With conviction, I try to demonstrate that I believe in the gospel; that I teach what I believe; and that I practice what I teach.^{iv}

My sure, steadfast, polite, kind, joyful, charitable, gentle and affable conviction carries a hope that their hearts will be opened to the Holy Spirit. I pray that on those days when I'm more inclined to the opposites of those values, that I don't turn anyone away from Christ. I don't want it said about me, "Why would I be a Christian if they're like him?"

None of us can believe the wonderful and fantastic message of the gospel on our own. Remember, we can believe only by the grace of God. It is by the Spirit that I am able to embrace the Word Made Flesh. Is your conviction born of the Spirit?

My hearer will long remember how they were treated by me. They will remember that care long after they forget what I said. If they feel that I loved them, even in spite of their obvious scoffing, they may be open to seek the one who inspires such love. It may be another Christian's turn to nurture that love for them. Don't worry. God has plenty of Christians to embrace all of his children throughout the world. God sends us in his own providential timing. In the end, it is the work of the Spirit. My spiritual director, Fr. Fitz, often told me, "Pat, get God there... and then get out of His way."

Have faith. Keep praying. Keep at it. Care about the person in front of you. Be charitable. Preach: Jesus through his passion, death and resurrection has opened Heaven—repent and believe. Demonstrate your faith and joy in Christ. Allow St. Paul to be your model.

What therefore you unknowingly worship, I proclaim to you.



ⁱ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles, Sacra Pagina*, pp. 319

ⁱⁱ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles, Sacra Pagina*, pp. 311-320

ⁱⁱⁱ Merriam-Webster Dictionary

^{iv} Rite of Diaconate Ordination