

Easter 6A 2020 SSP

Acts 17:22-31; 1 Peter 3:13-22; St. John 14:15-21

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

It is an ancient tradition in the Church during Eastertide to appoint lessons from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, Saint Luke's second volume following his Gospel. The reason for the tradition is Acts reveals the transformation of the Church from a circle of perplexed and frightened little people, turning inward and looking at Jesus – both before and after his death and resurrection – into the bold witnesses of Christ who take the Gospel to the world. **This change in the disciples, especially in Saint Peter on the Day of Pentecost, is the strongest objective evidence of Jesus's Resurrection.**

What happened? Jesus, after a forty-day period of appearances to his disciples after his resurrection, removed himself in his Ascension into heaven. "I will pray the Father, and he will send you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever." He spoke of the Holy Spirit, who turned that inward-facing circle inside out and drove them to the four corners of the earth, through space and time, to places like Antioch, Ethiopia, Rome, India, Spain, Britain and in due course – Providence. If Saint Luke's Gospel is the story of the acts of Jesus Christ in the flesh, Luke's Book of Acts is the story of the acts of the Holy Spirit in Christ's Body the Church.

Today in Acts we see the premier apostle alongside Peter, Saint Paul, formerly the zealous Pharisee and enemy of Jesus and his Church, now become Jesus's willing messenger to the Gentiles. The Holy Spirit has led Paul to the intellectual epicenter of the Greek world, Athens, on the Areopagus or Mars Hill. There Paul is asked by various Epicurean and Stoic philosophers to explain the new teaching they have heard that he is spreading. I visited the Areopagus two years ago with a group from the Church of the Advent Boston. It was swarming

with tourists on a brilliant blue-sky spring day. It's just below the great Parthenon. I had to climb slowly, putting my hands on the hill as I climbed, because the smooth rock is as slippery as ice. It was well worth the effort: I got to where the Apostle addressed those Greek philosophers.

Luke says the Athenians and others on Mars Hill "spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell or to hear some new thing." (17:21) They were the archetypal community of scholars. Paul's message *was* a new one to them; it was a variation of Jewish monotheistic faith – with a punch. The Areopagus had a kind of court to hear teachings. Paul wasn't on trial, as before the Jewish Sanhedrin or the Roman Governor; this was like a graduate faculty's review of an applicant's abstract for a thesis.

Paul needed to establish common ground with these professors before delivering his punch. Many Greek intellectuals, while giving public nods to Greece's multiple gods and goddesses, were actual monotheists – men like Plato and Aristotle – giving Paul something to work with. Today he quotes two thinkers from centuries before, Epimenides of Crete and Aratus of Paul's own Cilicia. The former wrote that God, the maker and governor of mankind, is very close to us, for "in him we live and move and have our being." The latter, noting that we are endowed with memory, reason and will, reflect God's image, and thereby "we are God's offspring." *There* is the Apostle's common ground.

The Greeks were careful about respecting even the gods they didn't know, including gods of other nations, and as they incorporated the altars of these gods into their pantheon, they even erected an altar "to an unknown god." Here was Paul's opening. He said in effect, Let me introduce the unknown God to you. God doesn't need our temples; indeed he doesn't *need anything*; he *provides everything*. Since we live and move and have our being in God, since we are God's offspring made in his image, he has undertaken to care for, and even judge us. Now

for the punch: *The measure by which God will judge us is a human being, the man who perfectly reflects God's nature and will, whom God raised from the dead.*

The Greeks didn't *do* bodily resurrection. They did disembodied-soul-immortality. Now they were hearing that there is more, that there is *life-after-life-after-death*! There is spiritual-full-bodied-immortality through the One whom God raised from the dead!

It doesn't appear that Paul won many converts that day on Mars Hill, or that a church – as in Thessalonica or Philippi or Corinth – was soon established in Athens. But they were interested: “We'll hear more of this from you.” The notable Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and some others followed Paul. I was glad to see a Greek Orthodox Church in Athens dedicated to Saint Dionysius.

*The point is that the Apostle Paul, himself a considerable Jewish intellectual now committed to the Jesus Movement, strode into the heart of intellectual life to present the Gospel there.* Academia is a place full of pride and envy, often a place of anger where reputations get slaughtered if one is not culturally correct. It's not easy for intellectuals to profess faith – the peer pressure against it is enormous. It is crucial that the Church make her case in such temples of privilege. The privileged need God's grace, they need Jesus's life and love just as much as the poor; perhaps more, because the poor cherish no delusions about who they are.

Still – one finds a few of Jesus's most devoted disciples right in the heart of academia. Some are at Brown University. Isn't it good that our beloved Saint Stephen's is situated right on College Hill?

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