



Gospel to multi-faith society, Acts 17:15-28

This sermon explores different scenes, starting with a reminder from Acts 16.

Perhaps explore just one scene at a time: [each scene is posted separately to help do that]

Each has a scripture setting, a thought and then a reflection to think and pray about; and to discuss in your small group

Scene 2, Strange Ideas?

Acts 17:15-21,

¹⁵ Those who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.

¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the market-place day by day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate 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. ¹⁹ 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?' ²⁰ You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.' ²¹ (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

Here he is, alone and with time on his hands. Perhaps now he gets a little holiday, enjoying a city break in Athens?

Imagine ... picture the sites from the days of Alexander the Great and seeing what the Romans have done with the place. Wander around town, visit the markets, observe the people, chill out at a coffee bar...

- Paul does wander around the town, observing, but what he notices motivates him to do it again – to share Jesus' Gospel with the people of Athens rather than only be a tourist.
- He finds the local synagogue and starts telling both Jews and Greeks who gathered there about Jesus.
- He goes to the markets – but he doesn't just observe, he begins to talk with others there, 'hey, have you heard all this fuss about Jesus who was killed but was restored to life?'
- He comes across a group of philosophers and joins their conversations – 'hey, let me tell you guys about the real God, about Jesus who was crucified and resurrected...'

What's going to happen? What is their reaction? And most importantly... 'what on earth is Paul talking about?'

They decide to debate this further with Paul. Leaving the market they go to a natural amphitheatre, where court hearings could be held and where philosophies were debated ...



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The Great Debate... Acts 17:22-28,

²² Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: 'People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³ 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. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship – and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

²⁴ '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 human hands. ²⁵ And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.

²⁶ From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. ²⁷ God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸ "For in him we live and move and have our being." As some of your own poets have said, "We are his offspring." (NIV)

Explaining the Cultural Context:

Have you heard the phrase, "in you we live, and move and have our being" before?

It was not a Christian phrase! It comes from a philosopher Epimenides (*eh-pim-en-ee-des*) who was born in Crete.

It was part of a poem and is a verse from it where the character called Minos addresses the Greek god Zeus, 'They fashioned a tomb for you, holy and high one, Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies. But you are not dead: you live and abide forever, For in you we live and move and have our being.'

The poem includes an insult against the Cretans (remember the poet is from Crete! So, he's talking about his own people).

Why? The insult is that they are all liars, and as they can't be bothered with finding out truth, they are also lazy. The lie, according to this philosophical poet is that they said Zeus was mortal and not a god.

What about the next phrase Paul uses – 'we are his offspring'. Another 'not originally Christian' phrase!

This one comes from a Greek philosopher Aratus who was from Cilicia – possibly even the town in that province, Tarsus where Paul was born.

... And is another poem, this one called 'Phenomena' about constellations. The full verse from which Paul quotes goes like this,



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'Let us begin with Zeus, whom we mortals never leave unspoken. For every street, every marketplace is full of god. Even the sea and the harbour are full of this deity. Everywhere everyone is indebted to god. *For we are indeed his offspring*'ⁱⁱ

Paul uses the intellect & belief of the philosophers to whom he is talking, to re-appropriate the meaning to Jesus. He connects with both their mind and heart to offer them an alternative narrative on the meaning and purpose of life.

Reflection: What are the beliefs of the people we live among today?

Questions: Rather than being drawn in or trying to fit into those belief systems, in the mistaken belief that being liked or popular is going to show Jesus' kingdom, how do we turn the beliefs of our society towards Jesus?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, why do the nations rage? Why does our society believe in the universe, impersonal balances of force such as yin & yang, self-fulfilling prophecy such as horoscopes? Spirit of God, be in me to help me share how you are Lord over all, how you lead me and how you are at work in my life.

ⁱEpimenides, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epimenides_paradox#:~:text=They%20fashioned%20a%20tomb%20for%20thee [accessed 13 Aug 24].

ⁱⁱ See 'Aratus', <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aratus> [accessed 13 Aug 24].