



Sixth Sunday of Easter

29th May 2011

Acts 17: 22-31, Psalm 66, 1 Peter 3: 13-22, John 14:15-21

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen

How lucky we are to begin our service with the words of St Alex: he taught us this morning that you can see back in time if you look through a telescope, and I had a feeling as I listened to the King James version that I was looking back in time – drawn back in time almost, and it's interesting to know that to do that we need a telescope. What telescopes do is they shut out all the other things that we might see, in order that we might focus on that which we're looking at. I think there's an important teaching in there for us as we consider today's readings, which give us a good opportunity to continue our encounter with resurrection and our struggle to understand its life-giving revelation. Resurrection is not something you can look at with a telescope, because resurrection does almost the opposite: instead of bringing our vision into a focus on the past, it rolls away the stone and opens up the enormity of tomorrow.

We read in the first reading that Paul has undertaken another journey, beyond the confines of his culture and his faith; he has travelled far and has crossed Asia Minor (modern Turkey) and has arrived in Athens. The Greek, Hellenistic culture is marked by an interest in the divine - that's why they had all those statues of gods all over the place. There's a readiness in the Greek culture to debate and explore philosophy and religion. For us in the present Paul's coming to Athens might also speak of his coming to the "cradle of Western Civilisation", for Athens it is said is where the modern world was born. Whatever significance we place on Paul's journey and his being in Athens, we can clearly appreciate that it is a movement beyond where he has been. In his address to the Athenians he is opening up a new paradigm, he's taking away the telescope, rolling away the stone and giving them an appreciation of something that has never before entered their being. Here we are reading about Paul engaging in the movement of resurrection.

Paul is (or was) ethnically Jewish, and of the tribe of Benjamin, '*a Hebrew of the Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee*'. His understanding of God would have been very much within the confines of his Hebrew tradition, and yet we now hear him proclaiming a new paradigm of God, a new understanding. Paul now speaks of a God who is universal:

'made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him--though indeed he is not far from each one of us.' Paul is speaking of a God whom others in other cultures seek in other ways to his own, and *groped* in that seeking *and find*. This really does change the whole context of God in the scriptures. Those who have never encountered the scriptures are still seeking, groping and finding God, a God whom others seek in other ways, through other traditions, a God whom all would search for. This is not the God that Paul had previously

worshipped and understood. And nor is it the far away God of Heaven; now Paul speaks of a God *'In [whom]... we live and move and have our being'*. A God alive in our very being. All that he understood has been rolled away and he encounters something quite new.

Of equal significance is Paul's recognition of the Hellenistic tradition; he includes their paradigm within his own understanding: in verse 28 *"as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.'"* Paul is drawing now from other traditions.

By way of contrast the psalm gives us the telescope again, for it takes us back to that past tradition that Paul grew up with and it offers a very different understanding of God:

a God who is in control of us: *and has not let our feet slip*

a God who can assess and improve us: *you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried.*

a God who establishes the weight of our lives: *You brought us into the net; you laid burdens on our backs;*

And in that past paradigm, that past understanding, the orientation toward God, rather than encounter, becomes ritualised: *"I will offer to you burnt offerings of fatlings, with the smoke of the sacrifice of rams;"*.

Next we have the reading from 1 Peter which was written by an elder of the church in Rome, another cultural centre, another important centre in the movement and evolving of civilisation; it is written to Christians in the midst of a pagan culture - once again we can find our own parallels with the present times.

The author seems to be wrestling with an understanding of God that spans quite different paradigms. On the one hand we have in verse 15 a call to *"in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord"*. And that is because, [v18] *For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God*. So we have that closeness – sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, because Christ died to bring God to you – no longer far away. God is within, God is alive, God is operative as our very being; God is a god who has been brought to us. And then on the other hand we go back to the past paradigm, whereby [v21] *Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him*.

These different understandings, different models of God, reveal a wrestling with an understanding of being, and so too a desire and a seeking for life's Divine fullness. As we seek God we seek our own truth – we're not looking for that which is far away, we're looking for who we are and who we are called to be. This is the place we inhabit post-Easter – when the revelation has been made its clearest; this is the place we inhabit in the light of the revelation of resurrection. Who are we in the light of resurrection? What is revealed in that newness of life's divine fullness?

Here in these readings we have an opportunity to reconsider (repent) all that is past in the light of resurrection. Unknowingly, the church inhibits our capacity to explore; it invites us to take up a telescope and look into the past. Like every other institution it seeks to maintain the status quo, and it does it by focusing on partial truths and making them the agenda of focus. Our current governments focus on the tide of 'boat people', which is in reality is a trickle, and so take our eyes and energy away from a much bigger picture. So too the institution of the church has taken selected texts and drawn us

away from wrestling with the very real possibility and the promise of resurrection. The institution asks us to look through telescopes; the stone being rolled away asks us to look with unbounded eyes.

The Gospel opens with "*If you love me, you will keep my commandments*", and for many or most the keeping of the commandments has been the focus, and invariably the discussion goes backwards into the past tradition of the ten commandments. If we do go back, then we are drawn back into a past paradigm of the God that was echoed by the psalmist. Someone wrote those commandments and handed them to us as rules to follow. "If you love me": if we really do hold in the truth of our being all that Christ has revealed, then we need not even know the commandments because in the activity of "Love me" we will be not only keeping such commandments, we'll be creating the commandments, and living in the Divine light of love.

"*If you love me, you will keep my commandments*": "If you love me" comes first and brings the scriptures into the present moment – it is a question asked of us now! It gives us the opportunity to consider where our 'love' is given and received, where our creative energy is located. It takes us, without any further reading, into looking at each other and at the world around us. "If you love me" makes us aware of our relationship with each other and with all of creation, and so too leads us to an appreciation of being "one body". The energy of Love, the abiding of the Divine in all life, is our orientation to resurrection. Verse 19, "because I live [the resurrection], you also will live [in the resurrection]".

The energy and orientation of love is expressed in a short delightful quote from Deepak Chopra: *The education of love (what love teaches us) begins in a moment and ends in eternity. It is sparked by feelings of delight and resolves into the peace that belongs to Being itself. In some haunting lines of poetry Kahlil Gibran expressed this truth:*

*Yet the timeless in you is aware of life's timelessness
and knows that yesterday is but today's memory
and tomorrow is today's dream
and that which sings and contemplates in you is still dwelling
within the bounds of that moment which scattered the stars into space.*

It's a delightful quote – the dwelling place of resurrection is in the same moment that scattered the stars into space. The moment of creation is eternal; to dwell in that space, we dwell within the energy of love. The education of love, like the energy of love is creative of life, and so too is creative of our world.

Paul knew this energy, revealed through the truth of resurrection – and the stone that was rolled away rolled away the stone of his culture and his faith. The stone that was rolled away opened for him (and so too opens for us) the doorway to resurrection, to life lived in the Divine. We naturally experience life lived in time and space; what resurrection reveals is life unbounded by both of those:

17 This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

The paradigms of the past, the view through the telescope, are enforced by our culture and by all who hang on to the past. Catch yourself out looking through the telescope, be aware of how much of your life energy is looking and orientated towards the past. If we read the scriptures with an historical location, then we will be looking into a primitive appreciation of the Divine, and most likely we will remain culturally enslaved by that fallacy that sees life as birthed in the innocence of youth and decaying towards death.

If we roll this stone away, if we seek the *Spirit of truth*, if we open our tomb to the one who *abides with you*, then in our turning, in the movement of “repent” we discover ourselves *within the bounds of that moment which scattered the stars into space*. And we know we too are *[his] Divine offspring*.

The Lord be with you
Peter Humphris