**Acts 17.22-31**

22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 23For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, “To an unknown god.” What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. 24The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, 25nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. 26From one ancestor he 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, 27so 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. 28For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said,
“For we too are his offspring.”
29Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. 30While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.’

**1 Peter 3.13-22**

13 Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? 14But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, 15but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; 16yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. 17For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God’s will, than to suffer for doing evil. 18For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, 19in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, 20who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water. 21And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 22who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

**John 14.15-21**

15 ‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. 17This 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.

18 ‘I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. 19In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. 20On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. 21They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.’

Who is the good news for?

The church’s mission is to share the good news: that God knows us, loves us, welcomes us and restores us. But who is that good news for? Is it for a select group of chosen people, who guard its integrity by fending off outside influences, whispering their beliefs behind closed doors? Or is it to be proclaimed in the streets, accessible to all, freely debated, and perhaps subject to misunderstanding and reinterpretation as it goes along?

In this morning’s gospel reading, Jesus seems to indicate the first option. “If you love me,” he tells his disciples, “you will keep my commandments, and my Father will give you the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, since it neither sees him nor knows him.” The gift of God’s continued presence, and the experience of his love, is for this small inner circle committed to following Jesus’ instructions, and specifically not for outsiders.

Contrast that with today’s first reading from the book of Acts. In the heart of cosmopolitan Athens, Paul argues that God is not the preserve of a favoured few, but available to all who seek him. “He is not far from each one of us”; “we are his offspring”, and “he has given assurance to all”.

How should we reconcile these two competing views of God’s message? I think by remembering, first of all, that the Bible often gives multiple perspectives of a single truth to help us understand it in more depth. (I don’t mean to suggest that any of us can hope to grasp God’s complexity; it’s good to remind ourselves that human understanding is only ever a faint shadow of the ultimate truth. But when two passages seem to contradict each other it’s often helpful to try and step back from them both.) Today’s readings belong to two very different situations. In the gospel passage, the disciples are gathered with Jesus at the Last Supper, just before his betrayal. They are about to face the catastrophe of his death, their own failure to stand up for him and the very real fear that they themselves will be rounded up and killed. They need to know how to rebuild their community and support one another in the face of that fear and failure. They need to know that God will not abandon them even if they have forsaken him. They need a focus of love and service that will bring them together so that God’s spirit can be shared among them.

In the lesson from Acts, Paul is speaking to a group of self-confident, educated, open-minded citizens whose safety is not in question. Athens was a centre of international trade and competing philosophies, where new gods were welcome as long as they were prepared to jostle along with the established pantheon. To hedge their bets, the Athenians kept an altar to an unknown god – in case they had missed any out and offended them. Paul skilfully uses this detail to demonstrate that his hearers already sense the truth he is about to share with them. Using a familiar landmark, quotations from their own poetry, and the rhetorical techniques of Greek discourse, he argues that God’s promise is for us all. But Paul’s message also contains a challenge: “he commands all people everywhere to repent“.

In these two accounts we see two sides of God’s generosity to us. His promise of hope and renewal is for the confident and fearful alike. It is hidden in the simple, recognisable, familiar things of life. Jesus’ parables repeatedly used ordinary everyday activities and objects to illustrate spiritual realities: bread, water, wine, lamps, vineyards, wheatfields and sheep. We don’t have to inhabit some exalted spiritual plane to have an experience of God: he set his seal on an ordinary human life; and his fingerprints are on all of creation.

But throughout the story of God’s interaction with humankind, there is always a choice about whether to listen to him. During Jesus’ own life there were multiple examples of people being slow to understand his teaching – or quick to reject his authority. After his resurrection, even his closest followers often failed to recognise him immediately. Perhaps it’s not surprising that we don’t always see the workings of God in our own day.

Jesus’s warning, that the world cannot receive the Spirit of God, has sometimes been taken to mean that only those who cut themselves off from mainstream life can claim to be truly Christian. If you want to get the true spiritual experience you have to belong to a holy huddle. That doesn’t seem to fit with Jesus’ own actions, though: his earthly ministry was a very practical, hands-on business, played out in the real world of eating and drinking, sickness, death, sex and violence. So what does he mean by saying ‘the world’ cannot receive God’s spirit? There might be a clue in John’s first letter, which expands on this same gospel passage and Jesus’ commandment that we should love one another: “Do not love the world…[says John] for all that is in the world – the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride of riches – comes not from the Father but from the world”; in other words, an obsessive focus on worldly concerns keeps us from caring for one another and blinds us to the truth of God. That doesn’t mean we can’t enjoy the beauty of the world around us, or be grateful for our good fortune and success when it comes, but we should perhaps be prepared for it not to be permanent. When difficulty or disaster strikes, we need a more resilient source of strength, and sometimes, a new way of seeing.

In those moments, we may find ourselves, in Paul’s evocative words “groping for God – and perhaps finding him”. Knowledge and understanding of God has to be sought for, but it is available to each one of us. We don’t have to be holy or clever or even particularly well behaved: just look at the people Jesus chose to be his closest friends. And, at least in my experience, it’s often manifested in a sense of confirming what we already half-knew: the ‘Oh, I see!’ moment making sense of information we already have but which we hadn’t quite managed to assemble. Early on in John’s gospel, Jesus provokes consternation by having a long conversation with a foreign woman (ritually unclean in at least three ways). He speaks to her of God’s message as “a spring of water welling up to eternal life”. The water that feeds a spring is present and yet hidden within the ground until it bubbles through to the surface to provide new life and fertility. And the woman’s reaction - “He told me everything I ever did” – reflects this sense of latent understanding as Jesus rearranges the jigsaw of her life into a new, coherent pattern.

There are signs of God everywhere around us if we choose to see them, in small acts of kindness, in nature, in the heroism of ordinary people doing extraordinary service. But we have to learn the practice of identifying them. That’s why Paul tells his hearers to repent (to turn away from their egocentric focus) and Jesus reminds the disciples of the centrality of love. Not because by being extra good we can earn God’s favour. Today’s epistle reading emphasised that although it’s good for Christian communities to practise good behaviour, our route to reunion with God is only through the sacrifice of Jesus. Rather, by following Jesus’ command to love one another, we begin to align ourselves with God’s priorities. Our faltering steps in that direction turn our attention towards God’s activities and teach us to notice them in unexpected places. And as we experience God’s love for us, we are in turn empowered to show that love to those around us, in practical help to our neighbours, in patience and generosity with our families, in a more committed stewardship of the resources of our world. In the infinite divine economy of love, we ourselves begin to spread the signs of God’s kingdom in the world around us. And that’s good news for everyone, saint or sinner, believer or unbeliever. Our choice is whether to be part of it.

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