**Paul in Athens: Acts 17. 16-31**

A stopover in Athens is not without its delights, as Jackie and I found on pilgrimage there.

For Paul, cooling his heels, waiting Silas and Timothy.

* A Pentecost story – the Church moving out to engage with the Gentiles.
* Goes into market-place – listens and observes
* Athenians open to anything new – cf 21C
* Distressed to find many idols
* *“Stand for s.th or fall for a.th”*
* Invited to Areopagus – council or hill
* Unknown God –“Just in case we missed one”

**An unknown God** – very powerful image. For God is mystery, and yet not unreal because of that. We don’t talk about unknown gods today, and yet the experience of something transcendent, something that lifts us up above the ordinary experiences of life, is quite common.

Think of **ANZAC Day:**  People felt lifted beyond themselves, into a new dimension of experience. But what sort of experience? **What content** would people put into this experience of mystery? Is it today’s equivalent of an unknown God?

Anzac remembers the sacrifice and suffering of thousands of our young, and others’ young. One person felt a connectedness with others. But is it for some a call to strengthen our military? Or for others a commitment to global peace and justice?

Experiences of something transcendent may be filled with great good or downright evil. Nazism? What about nationalism? Or corporate spirit? Or school spirit? Or Jesus’ spirit of love and compassion?

The content of such experiences is all important. This was Paul’s challenge: how to preach Jesus into the empty “unknown god” space in Athens.

**Not a soteriological brick**! (cf seed on barren ground)

* He listened, then preached into their context
* Epimenides: in him we live/move/ have our being. Aratus: we too are his offspring
* Distinct crossovers here with Christian faith
* Bridges if you like for weaving faith in.
* >>Good news of Jesus and his resurrection.

**Wendy Scott’s** research: contextual sharing

At an ethics conference in Auckland, Professor **Karen Lebacqx** gave a paper on Medical Ethics. Many of her audience expected an overview of complex ethical issues in western medicine, such as gene transfer, or when does human life begin? but Karen opened up a far wider perspective:

*During the hour that I am speaking to you, 50 children will die in Africa of disease and malnutrition. Disease and malnutrition are the causes of these children’s deaths, but not the reasons for them. These children are dying because their governments are redirecting funds much needed for social services into the repayment of loans to wealthier nations….Their health status has to do with the systemic factors of justice and injustice around the world.*

Karen introduced the parable spoken by the prophet Nathan to King David (2 Sam 12). The parable tells of a rich man who, although he had many flocks and herds of his own, took a poor man’s only ewe lamb to provide food for a guest. Her reference to Hebrew scripture had no sense of religious preaching about it. Having painted starkly the realities of the gap between rich and poor nations, she drew on an ancient prophetic voice to illustrate precisely a major contemporary injustice. *She wove the message with the context.*

**Pentecost** is a time for being infilled with God’s powerful spirit, and to feel the call to proclaim the Good News of salvation. It is a call to evangelism to people elsewhere, yes, but to those close to us, our neighbours, searching for something deeper, searching for comfort in distress, open to a call to ethical integrity and social justice, to reconciliation, care for the earth.

Let’s not throw them soteriological bricks, but let us listen carefully, and then weave in context the implications of Paul’s message in Athens: “What therefore you seek as unknown, I now proclaim to you, the Good News of Jesus who died and has risen again in our own lives.” *(end)*