

Oh You Athenians!

18 May, 2014

Scripture lessons: John 14:1-6; Acts 17:16-23

One of the things which has always fascinated me as a clergyman who has spent his whole career in the city is how it was precisely urban areas which proved so productive for Saint Paul during his missionary journeys, whereas for the last century at least the city has been regarded as a place which is unresponsive, if not hostile to the Gospel – epitomized by Harvey Cox's pivotal book *The Secular City* precisely a half century ago. Yet in his day it was exactly the city which proved most productive for Paul: Corinth, the cosmopolitan commercial centre where goods from the east and west of the Mediterranean were transhipped across the isthmus of Corinth to avoid the time-consuming and dangerous voyage around the islands of Greece; Ephesus, the powerhouse of Asia Minor; ultimately Rome, the capital of the Western world, itself; not to mention lesser cities such as Philippi and Colossae. How could he have had such success, when today the church and the Gospel just can't seem to get any traction in the city?

It is wise however to remember that a city was also the scene of one of Paul's most embarrassing failures: the famed city of Athens. At first it must have seemed like a marriage made in heaven: Athens, city of the great philosophers Plato and Aristotle, which still counted philosophy and intellectual debate as its chief industry – as Acts tells us, "Now the Athenians in general and the foreigners there had no time for anything but talking or hearing about the latest novelty" – and Paul's new message. And at first things go swimmingly: Paul attracts an audience, and gets himself summoned to the Court of Areopagus to propound his ideas there. But then things go sour. His ideas evidently were not novel enough. Unlike what verse 32 says, I would suspect that it was not the idea of resurrection which was the problem: the Greeks were perfectly familiar with that, from their Mystery Religions – the Eleusinian Mysteries (where the 'mystery' came down to 'Pssst: there IS life after death') and Orphic cults and myths of Circe and the eternal return from Hades; if anything, the concept was too familiar, and was scoffed at by those who sought something more. Perhaps it was the 'foreignness' of the idea that the divine should intervene in human affairs for any purpose than occasional dalliances, or now and then to put some uppity mortal in their place. But at any rate, Paul is dismissed with the even-then well-worn line about 'Don't call us, we'll call you', and, though he wins one or two converts, he packs his bags and moves on.

During the year after he was diagnosed with tuberculosis and was seeking recovery at the spa at Zurau, in West Bohemia, Franz Kafka, who is better known for his stories like *The Trial*, *The Castle*, and *Metamorphosis*,

produced a set slightly over 100 of metaphysical aphorisms. One of them touches directly on the Athenian disease, when it comes to spirituality. To quote it:

“The true way is along a rope that is not spanned high in the air, but only just above the ground. It seems to be intended more to cause stumbling than to be walked upon.”

In other words, true spirituality, the search for spiritual truth, is not some intellectual high-wire act performed in some rarified space, over a deep chasm, but down to earth: and precisely because of that is more likely to cause stumbling than to lead to success.

Our cosmopolitan cities – secular, or at least unchurched as they may be – are, like Athens, still full of people seeking spiritual meaning. Perhaps that is even more true today than a century ago, now that the churches, which had once provided ready-made answers and meaning, have declined. But when confronted with the message of Christ, as enunciated in John 14:1-6 – “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” – I have found that today’s Athenians are inclined to scoff. Is that all there is? I mean, that this teacher, who died before his message could really mature, is the ‘truth’? Granted, he told some good parables and there are moments in his teaching, like the Sermon on the Mount, that are among the high points of religion, and he set an example for a life lived for others, but isn’t there more? Where is the ‘ancient Wisdom of the East’ in this? Where is even the wisdom of the Talmud and the mystery of the Kabala? Where is the ‘secret knowledge’ of the Gnosis, which the church sought to suppress? Where for that matter is the divine knowledge, the Hermetic teaching, which is inherent in every human? Each one of us has the ‘truth’ in us too – or at least, in this day of deconstructionism, when all the ‘Big Stories’ (except The Market) are debunked, all of us have a truth, which really sort of comes down to there being no Truth-with-a-capital-T, but a whole lot of competing little ‘truths’, all equally valid. No, no, there must be something more; we must keep searching – rather like the character in C.S. Lewis’s *Great Divorce* who is so devoted to the search for Truth that he would sooner remain in Hell, searching, than accept the truth of God’s grace when confronted with it. And then there is that aspect of exclusivism: “no one comes to the Father except by me”. Isn’t that arrogant and insulting to all other truth? – and doesn’t that lead to the vicious persecutions that Christians have always conducted – at least since they stopped being fed to the lions themselves and got hold of the levers of power?

Well, I’m sorry, folks, but there isn’t anything more. Because the ‘true way’ is not some mysterious secret message known only to elite sages, mystics and spiritual heroes (and heroines), which we must seek, but rather it is the message that we don’t need to go searching – and, given our human limitations, all our searching would be in vain anyway. This is because the

Divine – which we humans conceptualize as God, and – though there are many other names which have been properly given to God – which we in the Christian West commonly, metaphorically (and limitingly) term “Father” – has come in search of us. That is the truth of the Gospel – that is the news that makes the ‘Good news’ good. We don’t need to search: God has come to us, to reconcile us to Himself. That’s all there is to it. Nothing secret about it. Indeed, there never has been anything secret about it since God sat under Abram’s tent flap – or maybe, if you want, since God recruited Noah, or even since He took evening walks in the Garden – and nothing new about it, except the development that God went so far in His seeking us as to be born into our world – the world He created – and shared our lives here with us, to bring us back. And, according to the Good News, that incarnation was in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, whom we term the Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah. And that is why it is exclusive, limiting. The one way to the Father – to God – is through God, who opened the channels of communication, who ultimately came to fetch us home. The other ways – of human knowledge and insight, elevated as it may sometimes be, of ethical life and good works, good as they may be – all fall short. God, in his grace, has come seeking us: and that is all there is to it.

But, although it is the main aspect, that is only one aspect. We could ask that question again, and come up with the opposite answer. “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life”: is that all there is? Of course not! That is because this is not a ‘knowledge’ truth, but a **relational** truth. It is not some factoid we know, but something we experience, on an ongoing basis. This relation is first of all with the person of God, through the person of the Christ. Now, relationships are always evolving. Perhaps the Divine does not evolve – at least by our human understandings, being Perfect kind of goes with the job description of being Divine – but we do evolve, and so our relation with God evolves, and as we evolve, we discover new aspects of the Truth and Way. It is a never-ending story – a ‘gebed zonder einde’, in a positive sense.

But the relation is also with our fellows. Because this is not an individual quest on our part, but God’s quest for us – all of us, in his creation – and for our reconciliation with Him, we are also reconciled with one another. We are all objects of God’s reconciliation together, and that makes us one. As Paul put it in his letter to the Corinthians, “From the first to last this has been the work of God. He has reconciled us to himself through Christ, and he has enlisted us in this service of reconciliation. What I mean is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, no longer holding men’s misdeeds against them, and that he has entrusted us with the message of reconciliation.” (II Cor. 5:18-19). It is not an accident that the controlling image of Eastern religions is the isolated sadhu, or monk, or Gautama under his Bodhi Tree, meditating, seeking enlightenment – and nothing wrong with that:

there are far worse things that Christians get up to all the time! – while the controlling image in Western religions is one of community, the shared meal, be it Passover, or the Lord's Table, or Eid. This is not to say that there are not communities in Eastern religion, or isolated hermits in Christianity and Islam – but by and large, the balance is different. And thus, if there was not already enough scope for development and discovery in our relation with God, there is an almost infinite room for discovery and development in our relation with our brothers and sisters. And heaven knows, we have plenty of work to do in reconciliation with one another!

Over the years it has occurred to me, as a working hypothesis, that one of the main reasons for the success of the Gospel message in urban areas was not that their inhabitants were more in search of truth than those in rural areas, but that people in the city are more in search of community: there is a strange paradox that the more people who are together in one place, the bigger the crowd, the more isolated the individuals who make up that crowd become: small aggregates of people have a sort of natural community, while there is no loneliness like that of the city.

But be that as it may, the answer to the question of the Athenians among us, and in us, in search of the novel, of new truths and ways, when confronted with the demand "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life", the sophisticate's question of 'Is that all there is?' – is: 'No, there is so much more' – though probably not in the sense in which the question is asked. Let us not be like the Athenians: when confronted with the True Way, let us not stumble over it, but willingly walk it.