

Last week we left Paul setting sail down river from Berea to the sea and from there taking a ship to Athens. *Paul's escort brought him as far as Athens, and came away with instructions for Silas and Timothy to rejoin him with all speed (Acts 17.15).* As Paul approached Athens by sea the first sight he would see is the same one which greets modern visitors, the ruins of the imposing Temple of Poseidon, situated on the promontory of Sounion. The companion temple dedicated to Athena also once located here had been destroyed by the Romans 100 years or so before. This reminds us that although still a great city and centre for religion, philosophy and education Athens in Paul's day was just a shadow of its' former self at the height of the Classical period. Paul would have docked in Piraeus, still the largest port, and headed by foot along the road with the Parthenon Temple on the Acropolis visible in the distance to guide him to the city centre.

If I may misquote Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz, Paul may well have thought *I am not in Kansas anymore!* The road along which he walked to the city would have been lined with monuments, statues, temples and a whole variety of altars, among which were those dedicated to an *unknown God*. We have this information from a later visitor, Pausanias, who recorded his impressions of visiting Athens traveling the same route about 150 years after Paul. The worship, at this time in late antiquity, of unknown gods or of all the gods together is known from various historical sources. Either people were afraid of leaving out any god or goddess or they were hedging their bets in case there was one somewhere they didn't yet know about. A bit like our Christian celebration of All Saints where we make sure that all the holy people in our tradition are acknowledged.

Ahead of Paul, always within his sight was the Parthenon Temple dedicated to the goddess Athena, sitting on the highest point in Athens, the Acropolis and surely the most spectacular Temple he had yet seen in his travels. If you haven't seen the Parthenon, even despite the hoards of visitors, it is still a very impressive monument. Perhaps we know it best from the misnamed Elgin Marbles the frieze which was removed from the Parthenon in the 19th century. They can now be seen in the British Museum. But it wasn't just the Parthenon which caught Paul's attention it was the whole religious atmosphere in Athens if Luke's take on the situation as told in Acts is to be believed.

16 *The longer Paul waited in Athens for Silas and Timothy, the angrier he got—all those idols! The city was a junkyard of idols.*

17-18 *He discussed it with the Jews and other like-minded people at their meeting place. And every day he went out on the streets and talked with anyone who happened along. He got to know some of the Epicurean and Stoic intellectuals pretty well through these conversations. Some of them dismissed him with sarcasm: “What an airhead!” But others, listening to him go on about Jesus and the resurrection, were intrigued: “That’s a new slant on the gods. Tell us more.”*

This was a very different audience from any that Paul had previously encountered. These were people, even the very hellenised Jews in the Synagogues who were used to questioning, debating and thrashing out every new idea. They were open to new ideas, new ways of thinking but not without putting everything to an intellectual test. This brings us to where we find Paul in this morning’s readings, standing on a small hill, Mars Hill or the Areopagus, just below the Parthenon Temple. This is the place where Paul is given the chance to explain his preaching in greater detail, a bit like Speaker’s Corner at Hyde Park in London. It is here on the 29 June each year on the Feast of St Peter and St Paul, that a service is held in his honour. Some scholars think that this speech as we have it recorded in Acts is more Luke and less Paul. But Paul grew up as we know in Tarsus a city with a great deal of Greek influence so he would have been familiar with the Greek way of thinking, debating but even he seems to have been a bit overwhelmed by the outrageous splendour of Athens.

The key to understanding the reaction to Paul’s preaching in Athens lies in the final part of the passage when he takes the Athenians to task for their idols, altars, temples and monuments - literally making gods out of stone and precious medals.

29-31 *Well, if we are the God-created, it doesn’t make a lot of sense to think we could hire a sculptor to chisel a god out of stone for us, does it? “God overlooks it as long as you don’t know any better—but that time is past. The unknown is now known, and he’s calling for a radical life-change. He has set a day when the entire human race will be judged and everything set right. And he has already appointed the judge, confirming him before everyone by raising him from the dead.”*

32-34 At the phrase “raising him from the dead,” the listeners split: Some laughed at him and walked off making jokes; others said, “Let’s do this again. We want to hear more.” But that was it for the day, and Paul left. There were still others, it turned out, who were convinced then and there, and stuck with Paul—among them Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris.

So although Acts records a few converts Paul’s preaching, as far as we know did not have any great impact in Athens as it had in Philippi, Thessaloniki, and other cities. There is no evidence for a fledging Christian community of any significance developing in Athens after Paul’s visit. Greek philosophy produced a climate of scepticism particularly when he preached about the resurrection of the dead. Although the Athenians did not agree with Paul’s views, they do not seem to have reacted with the hostility of say the Thessalonians. It seems that it took over 200 years for the Christian faith to become wide spread in Athens. At that time many of those ancient temples, including the Parthenon itself, buildings that Paul would have seen on his visit; these ancient sites became Christian churches.

After Athens, Paul went to Corinth. That is where he discovered Aquila, a Jew born in Pontus, and his wife, Priscilla. They had just arrived from Italy, part of the general expulsion of Jews from Rome ordered by Claudius. Paul moved in with them, and they worked together at their common trade of tent making. But every Sabbath he was at the meeting place, doing his best to convince both Jews and Greeks about Jesus.

And it is in Corinth that we will join Paul next week. As a taster I leave you with Paul’s words to the Christian family he would establish there.

1 Corinthians 1: 4-9: *I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind, just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you, so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; who called you into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*