**10th September 2017**

**Acts 17**

 We continue our look at the exploits of the first apostles as recorded in Acts chapters 13-20. We are looking at what habits or disciplines sustained them in their faith and mission and today’s holy habit is making more disciples.

I wonder if you have eve shared your faith with someone and have been used by God to help that other person discover a faith for themselves and join a church?

Most people seem to have a hang up about sharing their faith. It’s not the British thing to do. We don’t want to force our beliefs on another person we conveniently and apologetically convince ourselves. Yet the bible says in 1 Peter 3.15:

‘*But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.’*

There is a saying that the church is always one generation away from extcintion. If we don’t share and pass on our faith it all stops. And one of the reasons why the church is in decline in this country is because we haven’t been prepared to give an answer for the hope we have.

When I first arrived at University at the end of fresher’s week the Christian Union had a big evangelistic meeting. I was getting ready to go out to it when the guy in the flat opposite me said ‘where are you going?’ I said ‘oh I’m just off out.’

‘Out where. ‘

‘I’m going to a meeting’

‘What sort of meeting?’

‘A big meeting - to hear a speaker – lecture kind of thing’

‘O what’s it on?’

‘Well, err - the Christian faith’ – I said coughing

‘Well I’m not doing anything’ he said. ‘Can I come with you?’

‘Err, well - are you sure – it might not be your cup of tea.’

‘Let me be the judge of that’ he said.

Mike came along to that meeting and accepted the invitation to receive Christ into his life at the end of the meeting. I was utterly gob smacked. He left university in his first year to go and help in inner city London. He wanted to get involved with serving the poor. He then felt he should devote his life to working with the world’s poor and went back to University – this time at Birmingham –to study development issues. Then went out to work in India.

Never underestimate what God can do with our pathetic attempts at witnessing to the gospel.

We are only here because those first apostles went out and told the good news that Jesus was risen and was Lord. Their unshakable belief, that Jesus had been resurrected, withstood suffering, persecution and martyrdom and was the seeds of the church.

In our bible passage today Paul finds himself in Athens.

Athens in the ancient world was a centre for religious belief and philosophy. The Epicureans held a theory that the world and the gods were a long way away from each other with little or no communication. Their view was that you should get on and enjoy life as best one could and maximise pleasure and try for a sedate quiet existence.

The Stoics believed that divinity lay within the present world and within each human being so that this divine force though hardly personal could be discovered and harnessed. good living (virtue) consisted in getting in touch with and living according to this inner divine rationality. Paul gets the request to speak at the Aeropagus, the highest court in the city. He is met with scepticism ‘what is this babbler trying to say?’ ‘What are these strange ideas he has?’

I’m sure Paul’s speech was much longer than the two minutes we get recorded in Acts but the framework of his dialogue with these philosophers is here.

He draws attention to their altar to the unknown God. He connects with their beliefs to start with but gives them a challenge. You say you don’t know God but are you open to knowing God if God revealed himself to you? Some people are inconsistent agnostics. They are absolutely certain that we can’t know anything – which is paradoxical to say the least. Paul is asking them to doubt their doubts when he says to them they may not know God at the present but it’s quite possible , even likely, that there is something more you could know if you were willing to discover how.

Paul then says God, the creator of all things, has revealed himself in these days, by coming as Jesus. We may not go looking for God, but God comes looking for us. God speaks today, reveals himself to us so that we can reach out to him and find him.

He brings his address to a final flourish by telling of the future hope: God is going to judge the world and put the wrongs of the world to right and sort out the mess we are in. God is going to do away with all this idol worship. He is going to do this through the man who raised from the dead.

Paul challenges them with a sense that creation has purpose and direction, that God is in control of life and that the resurrection is the first sign that a new creation is on the way and this is what we put our hope in.

All of these views confronted the world views of those who were listening. There is a mixed reaction. Some sneered, but others said tell us more.

Paul certainly wasn’t afraid of them and his gospel message here is very much tailored to his audience and very different from other preaching he has given in Acts before this time.

Sharing your faith makes your faith stronger. Which is why it is a holy habit.

We all need to work out our faith – what is our good news – do we really believe it. And sometimes when you are engaged in genuine debate it will make you think through things as much as the person you’re trying to convince.

Whilst at university I met up with one of my lecturers in the bar (being in a pub helps men to feel relaxed) and we got into a heated argument. At one point he challenged me and said if he didn’t believe what I believed would that mean he was going to hell. Being young and brash in those days, I said yes I believed it would mean he was going to hell. (Imagine telling your lecturer he was going to hell - bang goes my grades!).

He replied by saying that I was talking about a God of love and the supposedly ‘good news’ about Jesus. Yet there was an undertone of menace and threat about it. Would God really damn him because he couldn’t believe everything I believed? Was salvation all about ticking the right boxes, signing the pledge?

His conversation with me sent me away to think deeply about fear and punishment and salvation. I’m still thinking about those things. My faith is evolving and changing as I reflect on my experience, how I see life and God and how I read and re-read the scriptures.

Engaging in the business of sharing your faith, genuinely and openly, will change you as you work through the questions and the doubts people raise. All I can say is don’t be afraid – as Peter says set apart Christ as Lord in your hearts and work out your reasons. Have the courage to believe that all truth is God’s truth and have the integrity to go where the Spirit leads you.

I had an atheist friend who was constantly challenging me, asking me questions, provoking my beliefs. Yet he did so because he was pursuing truth. If you have friends like that, embrace them – they are wonderful.

This friend eventually became a Christian. He thought his way there because he was primarily a thinker. But he also needed to be open emotionally and spiritually to make a step of commitment and faith.

We had gone through many questions – he could see reasons for faith. At one point I was getting tired of all the procrastinating. How many more questions have you got? When will you be satisfied? You have surely got enough to go on. And I challenged him with Anslem’s dictum (Anselm was an Archbishop of Canterbury a thousand years ago) who said that ‘I believe in order that I can understand’.

 ‘Can you see enough to make a step of faith’ I asked him. It is not a blind leap of faith because you can see some reasons to believe; but real understanding (and ultimately we will never understand Christianity without the Holy Spirit enlightening our eyes) real understanding often only follows faith.

Fortunately the challenge to him came at the right point when he was willing to make that step of faith. Hearts and minds are involved in conversion. Conversely, it is difficult to worship someone if your mind or heart has rejected them.

For the last ten years, Justin Brierley, married to a URC minister, has presented the *Unbelievable?* radio show on Premier Christian Radio, where atheists debate with Christians. In an article in this month’s Reform magazine he says that after a decade in the crossfire, he is still a Christian. He says:

‘*I once heard a preacher tell the story of a woman who found Christian faith compelling, but remained uncertain about committing herself as there were questions she had yet to resolve. So a friend took her to an old church and showed her the building. From the outside it looked austere and foreboding. But when they approached the front door and stepped inside, the light streamed through the stained glass into the church, bathing the interior with glorious colour. The church was a very different experience from the inside. Stepping into the Christian faith for the first time can be a similar affair. It needs to be experienced to be fully understood. Many people step in and embrace Christianity without needing to be convinced by arguments. For others, intellectually poking at it from the outside may well be an important part of their journey*.[[1]](#endnote-1)

We can’t argue people into faith but we can help them in the process by responding to their questions and providing reasons that there might be something about Christianity for them, that it makes more sense of the world than having no faith.

Last week a survey revealed that for the first time, more than half of people in the UK do not identify as religious.

Last year 53% of people described themselves as having "no religion", in a survey of 3,000 adults by the National Centre for Social Research.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Among those aged between 18 and 25, the proportion was higher at 71%, while 75% of people aged 75 and over said they were religious.

The figures reveal a downward trend for religious belief in the UK and a huge difference between generations.

We have a different context to share our faith from Paul standing up in the Aeropagus in Athens.

A few months ago I did a study evening looking at Tim Keller’s book ‘Making Sense of God’ [[3]](#endnote-3)– a book addressing our sceptical and materialistic age.

Keller said we should be asking questions of those who claim they have no need for religion. We should go on the offensive towards those who claim they have no need for faith.

If the universe is indifferent, meaningless, and we just here by chance and death is extinction in the secular view then why do people live with a sense of hope and purpose? If the natural world is all about the survival of the fittest why are we compassionate and give to charity? There is the problem of virtue.

What is the basis for human rights? Where do they come from? Is it sufficient to say they simply exist? Religious belief in a creator God is a better support and grounding for them surely?

What will sustain you in suffering if you believe that life is all about being happy and finding pleasure?

What happens after death? It takes as much faith to believe there is nothing after death, as it does to believe there is something after death?

Consciousness: Where is the link between brain events and electro- chemical processes and ‘thoughts’? Are our feelings about love and morals and reflections on reality just illusions? Does it not make more sense that we were created by a conscious idea making God?

I could go on and Keller in his book does. When you read up on this stuff you are preparing the answer for the reasons for the hope you have.

It is also fair to say that many people will throw intellectual barriers to avoid considering the claims of Christ and get you off their case – they throw them up to protect themselves against having to change their views and beliefs and behaviour. The worse sorts are the apathetic ones who couldn’t really care. Sometimes the supposedly intellectual barriers are just a smoke screen because they know the moral cost of following Christ would be too much for them.

I knew someone who enjoyed having sex with women. As many women as possible! It was his hobby to go out at night and try to make sure he was sharing someone’s bed by the end of it. Yet, as often is the case, he was also spiritually open. There is often a close link between sexuality and spirituality: both are seeking intimacy and love, meaning and purpose and it is no surprise that Jesus had more openness from the prostitutes and adulterers and the sexually promiscuous of his society than he did from the religious ones who thought they led moral lives and were OK.

This friend would talk with me at length about faith and God. He believed: but he wasn’t prepared to change his lifestyle. He preferred to stay with the transitory pleasure of sexual liaisons rather than go searching for the love of God. I don’t know where he is now. But I can only hope he is one of the Prodigal’s who are determined to wander off to the far country to do their own thing, to seek their own pleasure, and hopefully when they have had their fill, and realise it doesn’t truly satisfy them, God brings them to their senses and they come home to find a God who loves them deeper and with a love that is eternal.

Making disciples is not just a holy habit, it’s not just good for helping you grow in your faith as you have to work out the reasons for the hope you have in Christ. It’s also a command. Jesus said ‘Go into all the world and make disciples’ (Matt 28.19). There is an urgency and an energy to this request – because we also take part in the adventure of faith fuelled by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us as witnesses and in the lives of those who want to hear good news. Go make disciples.

1. <http://www.reform-magazine.co.uk/2017/08/for-the-sake-of-argument/> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-41150792> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Tim Keller, Making Sense of God, Hodder, 2016 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)