

Message for July 5, 2020

Acts 17:16-34

As I have said before, we are now living in what I hope and pray is a once in a lifetime experience: the Covid-19 pandemic. Slowly but surely life is, for many of us, returning to some small sense of normalcy even though life certainly isn't normal. Elsewhere in the world however the situation is getting worse; all we have to do is look at the United States for example. Contrary to what we may like to think though, there is nothing unusual about experiencing a pandemic.

Largely overshadowed by the horror of the First World War, the world experienced what is commonly referred to as the Spanish Flu a hundred years ago and its statistics make for grim reading. It has been estimated that in the span of two years about 500 million people or one third of the entire world's population was infected, and of them anywhere from 17 million to 50 million died. Another infamous pandemic was the Black Death that ravaged Europe in the Middle Ages. In the span of four years it killed about 100 million people or about half of Europe's population. And these are just the two most infamous pandemics in history; there has been a host of other ones as well. In fact it is believed that a deadly pandemic contributed to the fall of the seemingly invincible Roman Empire. Truly history is littered with these tragic disasters and in fact a pandemic 2600 years ago set the stage for today's scripture passage.

About 600 years before the birth of Christ, a terrible plague broke out in the city of Athens. Believing that the plague had been sent by the gods as a punishment, the people tried all sorts of remedies to appease them but nothing seemed to work. Then it was suggested that a flock of sheep be turned loose in the city. Wherever a sheep lay down it was to be sacrificed to the god whose shrine was nearest that particular animal. And if a sheep happened to lie down where there was no nearby shrine then it was to be sacrificed to the 'unknown god' and a shrine built in his or her honour. It was hoped that by doing this they would get rid of the plague and as a

result for hundreds of years afterwards, the people worshiped this unknown god, the Agnosto Theo as they called him.

Six hundred years later Paul visited Athens during the course of one of his missionary journeys. While there he got into a theological dispute with a group of philosophers. Paul aroused their interest and they wanted to hear more and he wasn't one to let such an opportunity slip by.

Paul preached a sermon and began by praising the Athenians and telling them how very religious they were. Why everywhere he looked there were altars dedicated to the various gods! The Athenians in fact even had an altar dedicated to the Unknown God! But now said Paul, this god would no longer be the great unknown because he was going to tell them all about him.

Paul told them that this unknown god is the creator of all there is and is the lord of both heaven and earth. Since he is so great and mighty he is everywhere and certainly doesn't confine his presence to shrines made by human beings! Being as great as he is, God doesn't need the little gifts of food left in the shrines either. Paul also said that this god hasn't just created everyone he has even instilled within every person a desire to know and experience him. For his own mysterious reasons though, in the past God had concealed his identity from everybody except the people of Israel; they and they alone had known God, but now?

Everyone could know God if they wanted to! They could simply because he had graciously revealed himself through the person of Jesus Christ, his one and only son! Now there was no excuse for anyone to plead ignorance of God. Indeed there was no more need for such as the altars to the unknown god either since he is now known! But added Paul, with knowledge comes responsibility. Since the Athenians now knew the identity of the unknown god, God expected them to forsake their old religious practices and turn to him.

This, briefly, is Paul's sermon to the Athenians and it is widely considered to be the best sermon that he ever preached. This sermon in fact is considered to be so good that for the past 2000 years it has been the

model that preachers everywhere are encouraged to follow. There is however one slight problem with this and that quite simply was that the sermon was a failure. We know this because Athens was the one place where Paul failed to establish a congregation. Now to be sure the sermon wasn't a total failure since Paul did gain some followers in Athens. One such follower was Dionysus who was a member of the council that governed religious matters in the city. Another was a prominent woman named Damaris, but overall? Athens represents Paul's greatest failure rather than his customary success.

I sometimes wonder how Paul must have felt in the days after preaching that sermon. It was the best sermon that he had ever preached and yet, relatively speaking, it got him nowhere. Paul must have been disappointed and perhaps even discouraged but his response to this setback is instructive. He didn't moan and groan or give in to discouragement. Instead he kept faith and quite literally moved on. He went on to Corinth where he founded one of the greatest congregations in the early church, and surely there is a message in this for us.

A long distance runner was once asked what the hardest part of a race was. With no hesitation he replied that it was the middle of a race. He noted that at the start of a race there is such a sense of excitement and anticipation with the crowd cheering the runners off. There is also a wonderful sense of anticipation when approaching the finish line too with the crowds urging the runners on to the end, but as for the middle? That, he said, is the hardest and most challenging part of all, to just hang in and keep on going. As I thought about this during the past week it occurred to me; in a sense this describes our lives right now.

Back in March when the pandemic first struck here there was a strong sense of crisis and a feeling that we were all in this together. We can think of the outpouring of support for the front line workers, the first responders and others. While it was anything but joyous or exciting, the beginning of the pandemic was in some ways like the start of a marathon. And like a marathon, we dream of a happy and triumphant ending too. When the day comes that we have a vaccine and life can get back to

normal? What joy there will be! Now though we are so to speak in the middle of the race and it is easy to feel so discouraged and tired of it all. These are not easy times and in many ways things seem to be so 'wrong'. Indeed did we ever think that we'd see the day when we couldn't gather together for worship? And even when we once again gather together to worship there will be changes to what we do and how we do it. Perhaps one of my neighbour's feelings about all of this is typical of how many of us may feel.

One day this past week when taking our dog for an early morning walk, I met an older neighbour. He told me that he had got up that morning, turned on his TV and watched the news. Then, as he said, he just sat there and cried. As he put it; "Nothing is normal any more. Everything is so wrong."

Quite understandably a sense of fatigue is now setting in for many of us. If and or when we feel this way though, we ought to remember Paul's example. Despite the disappointment and discouragement that he felt in Athens, he carried on; he did so because of his absolute conviction that God loved him, was with him, and would see him through. And so it is with us and God as well. This is what sets us free to live our lives without being hopelessly weighed down by fear, dread and trepidation. To quote one of my favourite hymns, "O God Beyond all Praising":

And whether our tomorrows
be filled with good or ill,
We'll triumph through our sorrows,
and rise to bless you still.

And so we shall.