**Sermon Easter 6A.**

Acts 17:22-31, John 14:15-21.

17th May 2020.

Military chaplains will tell you there is no such thing as an atheist in a fox hole, that when the bullets and shells are fired suddenly the thought of God seems rather more compelling. I can’t speak as a military chaplain but I have reason to believe there is no such thing as an agnostic when your team is in a cup final. My sister’s husband Phil is generally cheerfully agnostic, if he has a religion it is in his fervent devotion to Liverpool F.C. I recall when theobject of his devotion was recently in a cup final and on the day he texted me saying he would try God, Allah and Buddha, I think he even mentioned Yoda in a nod towards the Jedi, that day. All religions welcome, any god will do. Alas Liverpool lost so that is the end of that, until their next cup final anyway.

Some cultures and faiths have a very flexible attitude to a range of devotions and to forms of the divine. In Japan it is quite usual for someone to have a Shinto wedding and a Buddhist funeral. Go to India and it is not unusual to see Hindus visiting the shrines of Sufi Muslim saints or having a picture of Jesus in their home shrine alongside more familiar Hindu gods.

We in the “West” even if we are not believers in Christianity, Judaism or Islam have inherited much from their insistence on the worship of the one true God. In each of these faiths God is a jealous God and the practice of one religion cannot meet accommodation with the practice of another. It was not always so, in the Greek and Roman world – before Christianity became the official religion – and clandestinely for some time after – religious life was something of a smorgasbord of possibilities. This is evident in our first reading today, set in Athens – the centre of Greek philosophical and religious life.

I wonder if amid all the turmoil the Greek people have endured in recent years they have found much comfort in their glorious legacy? While I am firmly of the opinion that looking forward is more important than looking back I would hope it has been of some comfort to them.

Amid all their economic difficulties and the challenges of being on the front line of Europe’s refugee intake who could blame the Greeks for looking back at a past which seems glorious. To a time when the Greeks laid the philosophical, artistic and cultural foundations of Western civilisation. To a time like that described in our reading from *Acts* this morning.

In truth Athens had experienced decline then, like the other Greek states it had been absorbed by the Roman Empire but the intellectual life of Rome was dull and provincial compared to what was still on offer in Athens. Roman power might have held the Mediterranean world together but so did Greek ideas and the Greek language. So when Paul, whose energy and effort contributed to the new Christian faith moving out of a Jewish context and taking root in the Greco-Roman world came to Athens he had arrived in the intellectual centre of the world; yet he seemed disappointed when he arrived there. In the verses preceding our first reading we hear of Paul’s dismay on arriving in finding the city “full of idols.”

He retreats to the familiarity of the local synagogue and seeks to win over those he finds there before moving on to try and engage with the Epicurian and Stoic philosophers. It seems they are not impressed; their initial reaction was “*what’s he babbling on about?*” What he has to say, about the resurrection, is quite alien to them. So they take him to the Areopagus – Mars Hill – a site of temples and courts and ask him there to explain again.

Having clearly struggled to find some common reference, some cultural resonance with his audience so that they might understand, he has a brainwave. Among all the shrines, all the temples of Athens there is one altar dedicated to “an unknown god.” Greek religion held that the divine could be encountered in a myriad of forms and the altar to an unknown god was an acknowledgement that this people, for all their brilliance, could not know every way to encounter the divine or every god. It was, in a way, a gesture of humility. Paul had found his key, his connection with his audience. “*What therefore you worship as unknown I proclaim to you*.”

He goes on to say that this formally unknown god once known is the one true God yet he shows respect for their religious heritage. In verse 28 we hear him say; “*In him we live and move and have our being; as even some of your poets have said.”*  Though the source Paul drew on is lost to us we see that he is showing honour to the religious intuition and spiritual yearning of those he addresses.

His speech acknowledges that there are those who are reaching out for God, searching for deep meaning, responding positively to the prompting of the Spirit. So often we Christians have imagined ourselves as holding the truth, as being called to carry this precious light to those in darkness. Yet they are not in darkness, they are in the One “*in whom they live and move and have their being.*”

To be honest it was not the best reception Paul ever had, some heard him and became believers yet to Greek ears and minds a God who bothers with matter, who makes the world, who was present in a particular human life and who raised up that person from the dead was quite alien, absurd even. What was real to the Greeks was the mind and the idea of things, the world of the flesh was inconsequential, distracting even, polluted.

So Paul found a key, a language in which to address the Athenians. What he said would have been coherent and understandable, yet that doesn’t mean everyone found it was convincing. A salutary lesson as we draw close to Pentecost and hear again stories of how a new faith seemed to spread like wild fire and as we perhaps ask ourselves how we can breathe life on to its embers now.

We know of course there are places where faith is spreading rapidly and fervently. Nigeria is one such place, another is Uganda. In both cases the fires of faith have stoked a zealotry and intolerance so perhaps those who read the accounts of that first Pentecost Day longingly should be careful what they wish for. Yet for all that couldn’t we here do with a flicker of flame and some of the warm heat of zeal?

Over the last hundred years the tide of faith has receded and for many the language and concepts of faith have died. In this country and in many others church attendance declined rapidly after World War One, what seemed like eternal certainties could not withstand the carnage and slaughter of modern warfare; despite the old saying about there being no atheists in foxholes. Would that it ended there; but where was God when six million of the supposedly chosen people were being murdered on an industrial scale, or when the energy which powers the sun itself was unleashed on two Japanese cities? And it goes on; where is God for the people who had the appalling barbarities of ISIS inflicted on them in the name of religion.

In much of the world religion may be in retreat and we seem now to be in a post-Christian culture. In my first parish we tried a number of forms of outreach to the community which relied on the assumption that people had some memory of church laying there to be reawakened. Sunday school as a kid, going with Gran when you stayed with her, familiar Bible stories but the truth is we are a step on. The memory has faded away, it is not there to be woken up.

Yet for all that there remains that which in every person is God haunted. Augustine of Hippo, a theologian with a complex legacy to say the least, expressed this yearning beautifully in these words.

“*Late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient, so new, late have I loved you. You were within me, but I was outside and it was there that I searched for you.”*

If we honour the call to search for meaning and truth, for that which can satisfy that quality of being alive that we call soul then contemplate each face you see here today, and each face you see when you leave in the street, in the supermarket or wherever the remainder of the day takes you. Just as Paul was we are called to share the love, the hope, the life we have encountered and to do so in humility as an invitation; we need to hear the words and see the images of life and of hope around us if what we have to say has any hope of being heard.

In the gospel passage today, Jesus tells his disciples that though he is going he will send them an Advocate, the Spirit of Truth.; a Spirit which will abide in us and live in us.

This is the fullness which drives away our every emptiness and hunger, this is meaning, purpose and life. It is there at every corner, the voice of Wisdom enticing and inviting into life. This is the offer we have responded to and which, try as we can, we seek to share.

To a life enlivened by healing and transforming Spirit.

If we think money will make us happy then the Spirit teaches us that happiness cannot be brought. If we crave authority and control then the Spirit will teach us that they count for much less than kindness and love. It is this abiding Presence that is the energy which inspires us to go out into the world and nurture hope, possibility and love. We go out not as conquerors, not as people who have the light that those poor benighted folk don’t. We go as those who have heard an invitation, a voice that calls to everyone. Here is for so many the unknown god at the untended altar. Through our witness offered, lived out in humility, may – here and there – that God be named, new lights lit, new stories told. Amen.