

Athens unlike/like 20th Century

- At first sight a very remote/unfamiliar incident
 - Greek culture, idols, philosophers all strange, even with SS knowledge
 - not even the relative familiarity of the synagogue
- But, as we look more closely, the setting is uncannily like our own!

Cosmopolitan/Pluralistic

- Used to new things - "do your own thing"
 - almost intellectual titillation, rather than concern for truth
 - we too are a society bent on titillation, not just sexual but ideas too

Society littered with popular religion

- Idols, superstition
 - mix of Greek & Roman ideas
- True today too - v. high percentage believe in God... which God?
- Funerals still Christian; rise of New Age spirituality; even spiritualism - Mystic Meg for a while associated with the Lottery, horoscopes, prevalence of Ouija boards, etc
 - even the tendency there has been since Diana's death to make shrines of death scenes - the flowers at the side of the road...

Yet alongside pop-religion in Athens were the scornful pundits

- **Epicureans:** philosophers whose aim was happiness by serene detachment
 - God doesn't intervene; there is no judgement!
 - seeds of hedonism in their thinking, of pleasure seeking - though that hadn't fully developed in 1st Century
 - scornful of idols
- **Stoics:** man is happy when he aligns his will with the inherent Reason of the cosmos (logos)
 - this was their view of salvation!
 - so call to accept your place in the world & in the cycle of nature - rather like some parts of Hinduism
 - there was an ideal of service as that natural place in the order of things
 - and traditional mythologies were given a symbolic interpretation!
- All this sounds suspiciously like much of the intellectual climate of our day!
 - removal of God => short-sightedness, selfishness, small-mindedness
 - symbolic interpretation of "mythologies"
- Paul came proclaiming Christ in a climate startling like our own.
 - how did he seek to make Jesus known in his culture?
 - how might we in our secular world, in our land that has turned its back on Christian standards?

1. CONTACT

- First Paul sought a **point of contact**
 - unknown God - Athenians were covering their backs!
- Paul used this as a starting point for explaining the gospel
 - very alien point of contact for Paul, the mono-theist with a deeply Jewish outlook on life!
- Further, Paul uses the language of the Philosophers (particularly Stoics):
 - vocabulary, quotes from the poets, etc
- He builds a bridge.

Contemporary points of contact

- This building of bridges, seeking points of contact will also characterise any disturbing engagement we have with the world. Paul left "safe" territory, onto the philosopher's ground!

- Both at level of particular situation, and in our daily lives:
 - we will seek to identify points of contact
 - we will think about how the gospel can be explained in those contexts
 - perhaps it'll be in the search for purpose that many have, the evidence for which we see in the New Age movement. The contemporary search for the unknown God.
 - perhaps it will be in shared interests and outlooks (football; parenting; even work)
 - points of need, such as illness or death (often uncover real feelings about life/purpose)
 - the political scene, whether moral issues or fundamental attitudes
- Whatever points of contact we are able to identify we can seek to discover how the gospel might best be explained in that situation. What is it about football...?

2. CONFRONTATION

- Having made contact, Paul doesn't simply agree with the Athenians...
- Confronts them with gospel.
- In particular, he paints a **TRUE** picture of what God is like:
 - knowable; creator; giver of all life; doesn't need human sacrifices etc.; giver of purpose, which is that men might know him and have that relationship of son-ship; God is judge of all in Christ Jesus (note Jesus as historical person).
- Paul says: this is where you are at (unknown God), but this is where you should be...
 - he is including a challenge to particular aspects of the philosophers and pop-religion of the day
 - challenge to idea of judgement & resurrection to the Epicureans;
 - challenge to popularity of idols/pop-religion to the masses, etc.

Confrontation Today

- *"Do not let the world squeeze you into its mould", Rom 12:2*
 - for instance, we will confront selfishness
 - and that in both our words & in our deeds
- Crucially, it will involve a true presentation of God
 - for instance, in morality, not just me being quirky/square/..., but God's standards
 - it will not do for us merely to condemn...
 - rather, we will confront with a true picture of God's way, modelled in our words and deeds.
- May well be uncomfortable - Paul got off with being called a babler & a fool!
 - what happens today when we confront the world with, for instance, judgement...?

3. COMMITMENT

- Finally, Paul called for change, for a commitment to Jesus Christ, for repentance
 - didn't leave folk unaware of how to respond
- They had to change, and make a new commitment
 - not merely some intellectual assent that this was an interesting new idea...
- They themselves had to turn away from their old ways.

Calling for Commitment today

- Call for repentance of the sins people are actually indulging in?
- Same call for turning from sins today as in Paul's day - not gone out of fashion!
- How many have never come to faith because they have never been challenged to make any commitment by those whose lives have perhaps confronted them with Jesus?
- (True as much in pulpit and in the impression we corporately create)

Conclusion

- Reflect on own experience in EPCC, being less effective than I might have been:
 - I had scope for contact, not taken up very much (real friends at church?)
 - there were plenty of areas where my life was merely "nice", decent, without being particularly challenging, without confronting people with a true picture of God
 - *(NOT suggesting crass "in-your-face" Christianity!)*
 - therefore, rarely called for any kind of commitment
- I suspect that my experience is true of many people seeking to live a Christian life in our secular society. Its hard!
- But, I believe that if we are prepared to take a risk, model ourselves on Paul:
 - make Contact, Confront people with the true God, and make a call to Commitment...
 - then we will more adequately bring Christ to our society.
- Application to our situation as a church:
 - **contact** through the CCC things - Fintry Forum, Halls - not shallow, but deep, real and serving contact
 - **confrontation** - challenge with Christ, present Christ - we care, we won't take lottery funding, we will value you as people, we will love, etc
 - **and confront** - actually call people to come to Christ; actually invite people to the Start! course, and not just assume someone else will.