

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
 - this reason for the picture - interest, however "cuddly" in life beyond, whether devil or angels...
- 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...? **Lion Rampant!**

2. Communication

- Having made contact, Paul doesn't simply agree with the Athenians...
- Seeks to communicate the gospel, and its truth
- 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.

Communication 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 the freedom and fullness of life that is on offer as we walk in God's ways
 - **it will not do for us merely to condemn...**
 - rather, we will communicate a true picture of who God is, modelled in our words and deeds
- May well be uncomfortable - Paul got off with being called a babbler & a fool!
 - what happens today when we confront the world with, for instance, judgement...?
 - or when other Christians misunderstand us...

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?

Conclusion

- Reflect on our own experience:
 - what contacts do we have... and can we culture? Do we have any real friends who are not Christians?
 - are we more than merely "nice", decent, without being particularly challenging, without **communicating** to folk around us something of who God is, a true picture...
 - and is there space for us to call for 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, Communicate to people 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 Summer Focus and Fintry Forum, and in our lives - not shallow, but deep, real and serving contact
 - **commuication** - challenge with Christ, present Christ - Alpha, conversations, the way we value people and care for those in need, etc
 - **and confront** - actually call people to come to Christ; actually invite people to the Alpha course, and not just assume someone else will!!