

## Sheffield URCS worship for 17<sup>th</sup> May 2020

### *With Paul in Athens*

#### **Welcome and Call to Worship -** from *John 14:15* and *1 Peter 3:15*

Spirit of truth, come close to us.  
Unite us into the body of Christ.  
Enable us to worship God  
In Spirit and in truth.  
Help us to support and encourage  
each other.  
Help us to love as we are loved.  
Spirit of truth, come and abide in us.  
**Amen.**



The Apostle Peter encourages us to worship and witness:

*Revere Christ in your hearts as Lord and always be ready to give an answer, gently and respectfully, to anyone who asks for the reason for your hope*

#### **Hymn**

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!  
O my soul, praise him, for he is your health and salvation!  
Come, all who hear: brothers and sisters draw near, praise Him in glad adoration.

Praise to the Lord, who oe'er all things so wondrously reigneth;  
shelters thee under his wings, yea so gently sustaineth!  
Hast thou not seen? All that is needful has been granted in what he ordaineth?

Praise to the Lord, who doth prosper thy work and defend thee;  
surely his goodness and mercy here daily attend thee.  
Ponder anew, what the Almighty can do, He who with love doth befriend thee.

Praise to the Lord! O let all that is in me adore him!  
All that hath life and breath, come now with praises before him.  
Let the "Amen!" sound from his people again; gladly, for yes, we adore him.

#### **Prayer of Worship Thanks and Confession** (from *John 14:15*)

Jesus said: *If you love me you will obey my commands, and I will ask the Father, and he will give you another to be your advocate, who will be with you for ever – the Spirit of Truth.*

Yes, our God, we can put our faith into words today!

We can sing it, say it, think it, feel it, mean it.

For, though you are the God of mystery, unknown and unknowable, the One who alone rules over creation, judges in righteousness and gives life to the world.

Even so, we can put our faith into words BECAUSE You grant us, promise us, 'grace' us Your Spirit of Truth.

So let us rejoice in that Spirit in the name of Jesus Christ as we lift our hearts in gratitude to you. Forgive us, we pray, that we have lived apart from your Spirit. We have not loved you, nor obeyed your commands, and the truth has not been in us. We have believed that we, ourselves, have all the answers. We have failed to believe that we need your truth.

Even so, you have not kept distant from us; in merciful love you have held us in life.

So may our broken lives be touched by your Spirit of Truth. Raise us, in the humble confidence of faith, to live in your truth and for your glory.

In Jesus' name and by his Spirit.



## Readings for the week

**Psalm 66, vv 8-20** - Praise and thanks to the Lord

**Acts 17: 16-31** – The Apostle Paul carefully, creatively but confidently proclaims the resurrection of Jesus to the people of Athens.

**1 Peter 3:13-17** – The Apostle Peter encourages believers how to live humbly and respectfully alongside their neighbours.

## Hymn

We have a gospel to proclaim Good news for all throughout the earth;  
The gospel of a Saviour's name: we sing His glory, tell His worth.

Tell of that glorious Easter morn: empty the tomb, for He was free.  
He broke the power of death and hell that we might share His victory.

Now we rejoice to name Him King: Jesus is Lord of all the earth.  
This gospel message we proclaim: We sing His glory, tell His worth.

## Thought (based on Acts 17)

Something is stirring in the UK...a song, by worship leaders from many churches, has been watched by over two million people on *Youtube*. Many non-Christians have said it moved them, unexpectedly, to tears. Research commissioned by *Tearfund* indicates three million people in the UK are now praying and an estimated 24% of the population have attended online-church since lockdown began. Online bookstore *Eden* reports a 55% increase in sales of Bibles in April. Nicky Gumbel of *Alpha* says "I've never known a time when people are more open to God's word."

So has there been a better time to be prepared to share our faith? In our reading we see Paul, in Athens, sharing with people very unlike himself, people he might have thought would never give him a hearing and yet, the passage is clear, they wanted to hear and invited him to speak! Paul gives a master-class in sharing faith with three lessons, very relevant to us in our situation.

Firstly, while waiting for the invitation, Paul **considers carefully** the people with whom he is living. What are their concerns, their fears hopes and longings? What are they seeking? The Greek of the text suggests Paul took a long time over this before opening his mouth. He combed the city, using both ears and eyes carefully, searching for a point of entry for the message of resurrection.

He finds this when he stumbles across an altar "to an unknown God". At this point Paul realises the Athenians are men and women like him, reaching out for purpose and a belonging-place in the universe. He respects them as God's image-bearers, like himself.

How often are we told God gave us two ears and one mouth and we must use them in that proportion? Sharing the Gospel is as much about listening as speaking, of understanding our culture and its questions. When we take our time our words will then be far more effective - because we will scratch where people are itching.

Our age craves instant results and we can want that in mission. Sudden conversions are biblical and possible but many experience a slow turning to faith. Swiss theologian Francis Schaeffer said: "I'm in no hurry to make people confess faith. If we wait long enough, we learn God has all the time in the world. People become Christians after long years of struggling to understand." Sudden conversions can make a big splash but then lead nowhere; but those who take their

time can become the most deep-rooted Christians of all, like C. S. Lewis, surrendering to God after years of wrestling, and becoming one of the most influential Christians of our time.

Secondly, the effect of this patient consideration is in the way Paul **communicates culturally**. Consider his sermon and a number of things strike you. He preaches in very different language than he would use with a Jewish audience: not sin, righteousness and sacrifice but creation, hope, identity and meaning - ideas that resonate with his Greek hearers!

Paul is not changing his message for the sake of an alien culture but finding the common bridge to it. Rather than being totally alien to Christianity, our culture still believes many Christian things. During the crisis, frequently, I hear people saying we should "love our neighbours" and "go the extra mile" - using Christian language without perhaps realising it! Paul shows people how they were already in a "God culture" - living and moving and having their being in God, as part of His good creation. In effect, he is saying to them "You already believe my message, now I am giving you the reasons why you believe it and the opportunity to embrace it, outwardly."

The task of sharing faith is, often, to find where people are and tell them why they are there; to pull tight the drawstring of the net that the fish are already swimming in. The book of Acts has many instances where the Apostles played catch-up with the Holy Spirit who was already speaking to people beyond the walls of the Church in languages they could understand.

So Paul uses illustrations from the Athenians' own culture, quoting Greek poets; not a word of Hebrew Scripture anywhere!! In this current crisis we are having to find new ways of sharing faith with people already asking questions which the Gospel answers. Maybe they ask in ways we fail to see, but the questions are there if we listen hard enough - for example, in one of my favourite films, *Forrest Gump* - we see a feather blown on the breeze with Forrest musing: "*I don't know if we each have a destiny or if we're all just floating around accidental like on the breeze. But maybe it's both - maybe both is happening at the same time*" - what a statement of the human condition; what an invitation for Gospel conversation! I suspect Paul, if with us today, might preach from *Forrest Gump* not Greek Poets - or even the Bible!

Finally, Paul is **quietly confident** in his message. Although considerate and relevant he's not watering anything down. "You may think this God is "unknown" but I know him and I proclaim him to you", he says! There is plenty of meat in Paul's words for the Athenians to get their teeth into: God created the world and all things, he is the author of life; he forms us not the other way around! He is the foundation of all our social life and personal meaning; his judgements underpin all our notions of justice; he graciously overlooks past ignorance but now calls us, unmistakably, to turn to him and know him because he has revealed himself decisively in history through Jesus, vindicating this revelation by raising him from death! This is a real God for real life in the real world!

Secularism, making truth relative and reducing it to human opinion, has robbed us of confidence in the very word God speaks in Christ for our benefit and redemption. So a spiritual vacuum filled with all sorts of second-best has formed - a vacuum allowed by our silence. Yet Christ is the only true hope of humanity, offering restoration to individuals, reconciliation to communities and renewal to creation. We think ourselves wise but the ultimate outcome of un-committing unbelief is a collective unreasoning, where we don't believe nothing but we believe ANYTHING. Yet Peter exhorts us, in another lectionary passage, to be ready to give a REASON for our hope in Christ's resurrection - IF the world wants to hear and should ask.

IS the world asking? Ironically Paul persuaded few in Athens despite following his own master-class methods - though probably more than if he had not. We still have far to travel. Many may still not want to hear. But there are signs that something is stirring - that there is greater openness than for many years...We are often exhorted to "gossip the Gospel" - but perhaps there's a better way: don't gossip, just blurt it out if the least opportunity arises, before fear puts the brakes on. What have we to lose? Who knows? People may, as in Athens, be ready, at least to give us a hearing...

Let us prepare to look and listen - **considering carefully**,

Let us persevere in creative expression - **communicating culturally**,

Let us proclaim courageously - **quietly confident**  
that the risen Jesus is the answer to all our searching.

### **Prayers of Intercession**

God, in whom we live and breathe and have our being, we pray:

For those who are sick and suffering  
For those who are grieving  
For those who are stretched physically and emotionally on the 'front line'  
For those whose livelihood is under threat  
For those who struggle without their normal support

For those who feel particular pressures in the lockdown

For those who must make finely balanced decisions to protect and guide us  
For those who, through poverty, face the epidemic without the protections we enjoy.  
For those whose plight has been forgotten in the pandemic.  
For the coming together of the world community with hope and determination to build a world in which we can live together peacefully, compassionately, justly and sustainably.

God in whom we live and breathe and have our being, hear our prayer, heal our brokenness and restore our hope. In the name of Jesus Christ our saviour.

### **The Lord's Prayer...**

#### **Song**

Lord, the light of your love is shining, In the midst of the darkness, shining  
Jesus, Light of the world, shine upon us, set us free by the truth you now bring us  
Shine on me, shine on me...

*Shine, Jesus, shine, fill this land with the Father's glory  
Blaze, Spirit, blaze, set our hearts on fire  
Flow, river, flow, flood the nations with grace and mercy  
Send forth your word, Lord, and let there be light*

Lord, I come to your awesome presence; from the shadows into your radiance  
By the blood I may enter your brightness; search me, try me, consume all my darkness  
Shine on me, shine on me...

*Shine, Jesus, shine...*

As we gaze on your kingly brightness, so our faces display your likeness  
Ever changing from glory to glory; mirrored here may our lives tell your story  
Shine on me, shine on me...

*Shine, Jesus, shine...*

#### **Blessing**

The discerning compassion of the Father,  
The creative speaking of the Son,  
The humble confidence of the Holy Spirit,



Be yours, be mine, be ours...