

Athens

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Date: 17 May 2020

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[0 : 01] Good morning, my name is Jill and our reading today is taken from Psalm chapter 16 verses 1 to 8. Keep me safe, my God, for in you I take refuge. I say to the Lord, you are my Lord. Apart from you I have no good thing.

I say of the holy people who are in the land, they are the noble ones in whom is all my delight. Those who run after other gods will suffer more and more. I will not pour out libations of blood to such gods or take up their names on my lips.

Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup, you make my lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places. Surely I have a delightful inheritance. I will praise the Lord who counsels me. Even at night my heart instructs me.

I keep my eyes always on the Lord. With him at my right hand I shall not be shaken. Amen. Good morning, my name is Alistair. Our second reading this morning comes from Acts chapter 17 verses 16 to 34.

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.

[1 : 20] A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, what is this babbler trying to say? Others remarked, he seems to be advocating foreign gods.

They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, may we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?

You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears and we would like to know what they mean. All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said, People of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription to an unknown God.

So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship. And this is what I am going to proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands.

[2 : 33] And he is not served by human hands as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations that they should inhabit the whole earth.

And he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.

For in him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, we are his offspring. Therefore, since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image made by human design and skill.

In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed.

He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead. When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, we want to hear you again on this subject.

[3 : 44] At that, Paul left the council. Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysus, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Demaris, and a number of others.

Amen. Thank you for God's word. So let's just pray for Alistair as he comes to speak to us on what we've just read this morning. Father God, we just thank you for your word.

And we just pray for Alistair as he comes to share with us this morning. We pray that you are with him and that you can just help him to deliver what's on his heart. We just thank you for all of the work he's done in preparing your message.

And we just pray for him now as he comes to speak to us. In Jesus' name. Amen. Good morning, everyone, and welcome to this service. Let me add my welcome to Graham's.

My name is Alistair. I have the privilege of being the assistant pastor here at Brunfield. And the privilege of leading us through that passage that was just read to us from Acts chapter 17, verses 16 to 34.

[4 : 50] But to start off, I want you to imagine that you're on holiday in a new city, one of the cultural capitals of the world. It's probably a wonderful dream that many of us are having during this lockdown.

But when you go on holiday, when you visit a large, prominent city, what is it that grabs your attention? Prior to my wife, Sabina, and I moving to Edinburgh, we lived in Vienna for a few years.

And when we used to walk around, I would constantly be looking up. Because we were walking past buildings that were hundreds of years old. You'd look up and you would see intricate wreaths made of stone.

And you would almost think that they were made of real leaves and flowers. And then you'd see sculptures and statues that were so lifelike.

With every step, you couldn't help but be drawn into the beauty of the city. And on top of that, you'd walk past opera halls. You'd hear masterful artists playing their instruments.

[6 : 04] Talented opera singers belting out tunes in the middle of the city centre. And you'd walk past birthplaces of famous composers. And you couldn't help but marvel at the beauty of a city like that.

Most of us are probably like this when we go and visit somewhere new. We walk around and the things that grab our attention are the architecture, the culture, the atmosphere of the city, right?

Well, this morning we're going to go on a journey with the Apostle Paul back in time to the ancient city of Athens at the height of its cultural significance. It was a prominent city.

A place where philosophers would gather and debate and discuss the newest ideas. An intellectual hub for the greatest minds of the ancient world.

An ancient city filled with hustle and bustle. But we're going to focus on two things this morning. Firstly, what the Apostle Paul saw as he wandered around Athens.

[7 : 11] And then secondly, what he did because of that. So the first thing that we see in this passage is seeing the reality.

In verses 16 to 21. Seeing the reality. So Paul, Silas and Timothy have just been in Berea. A town where the Jews listened to Paul's message.

And they examined the scriptures every day to see whether what he was saying was right. And we see that from verse 11 in chapter 17. But then people from Thessalonica came and caused a riot and made trouble so that Paul had to leave.

And he was taken to this city of Athens. A city that, as far as we know, he had never visited before. And he was to wait there until Silas and Timothy would join him.

So what would you do if you had a few days to kill in a city you'd never been to before? Well, you'd go sightseeing. You'd go and check out the local hotspots.

[8 : 18] You'd try the local food. You'd look at the tourist attractions, right? If you go to Paris, you're going to try your hardest and bend over backwards almost to get the whole Eiffel Tower into your picture frame.

30 attempts later and 28 fake smiles and you finally get the picture you wanted. But what does Paul see as he walks around Athens?

Well, look with me at verse 16. Paul's eyes aren't drawn to the architecture or to the culture or the sophistication or the philosophical significance of the people in Athens.

His eyes are drawn to the idolatry and he is deeply, deeply distressed. Now, Sabina and I spent a few weeks in the Middle East last year and we visited a number of touristy hotspots in the area.

We stood next to and took pictures of ourselves in the ancient temples of Zeus, of Hercules and of Diana, just to name a few.

[9 : 33] But one day as we were in one of these temples, we were talking about how thousands of years ago that place would have been heaving with worshippers and stalls of people selling small household gods, people selling false gods and false hope.

And we were amazed at the absurdity and the evil of the idolatry that we were now standing next to and taking pictures of. But Paul wasn't standing in an empty city.

He was walking through a city that was full of idols, a new idol around every corner. It's as if they were drowning in a ton of false deities.

And this upset. It provoked and it compelled Paul to see the reality of the situation and to preach the gospel to them.

Paul sees the idolatry in the city and he knows the deeper reality that it conveys. That these people are giving glory and honour to created things instead of to God, the creator.

[10 : 53] But we can't look at this and think that we're any different or that somehow our world has overcome this problem of idolatry. Sure, our idols look different but just take a wonder down Princess Street here in Edinburgh.

Or look at the advertisements on television and you will see what the idols are that we worship today. Popularity, material wealth, a good reputation, having the perfect body, relationships, sex, being liked by everyone and so on.

None of these are bad things in and of themselves but they are terrible gods. Terrible things to worship. We are no different from the city of Athens.

As John Calvin, the pastor and theologian from many years ago once said, man's mind is a perpetual factory of idols.

Idols are the things that we, that take up our time, that take up our energy, our money, our effort. The things that we prioritize over God.

[12 : 11] Do you want to know what your idols are? think about what you miss most during this lockdown. Think about what your mind is consumed with and what you give all of your time to.

Idols are the things in our lives that take the place that should be reserved only for God. And so Paul sees this and he is compelled to speak and he reasons with the Jews in the synagogue and goes into the marketplace and in verse 18 it says that he preached the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

So Paul sees the reality of idolatry and he is compelled to preach. Friends, how do we respond to idolatry?

we are surrounded in a world that is trying to find satisfaction and fulfillment and meaning in things that won't deliver.

We try to find satisfaction in our jobs, in our university grades, in our material possessions, in our marital status and many more things.

[13 : 25] but in reality that points to one truth that humans are born worshippers and we are naturally born worshipping the wrong things.

We shouldn't be worshipping things that are gone in a flash, things that can break and things that don't satisfy. Friends, we should only be worshipping God and in the face of idolatry our response shouldn't be apathy.

We shouldn't walk away and not care at what people are doing but we should point people to the only person who is worth worshipping, the person who created us to worship and glorify him and that is God alone.

When we see idolatry we need to see the reality of it and it must lead us it must lead us to boldly proclaim Jesus to a world that is hardwired to worship.

The second thing that we see in this passage is speaking the truth in verses 22 to 34 speaking the truth. So Paul has preached to the people of Athens and they called him a babbler.

[14 : 48] They accused him of advocating foreign gods in verse 18 and he was told that he was promoting strange ideas in verse 20 but this doesn't deter him.

Paul is still deeply distressed by the idolatry that he sees and now he's brought before a council a group of prominent people who were responsible for the moral for the education and for the religious act of Athens and he's asked to explain his message and look where he begins in verse 22 read with me people of Athens I see that in every way you are very religious for as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship I even found an altar with this inscription to an unknown God so you are ignorant of the very thing you worship and that is what I am going to proclaim to you now in this verse Paul isn't approving of their polytheism their love for a plethora of idols he isn't saying this unknown God that you worship I'm going to tell you about him and he isn't saying that there are multiple ways to

God he's pointing out the absurdity that they are worshipping something they have no idea about and he goes on to proclaim to them the one true God who is deserving of worship Paul draws out five wonderful truths about God that I hope will encourage us all as Christians this morning that will comfort us and lead us to worship our all powerful our almighty and our amazing God God and this should encourage us because Paul doesn't do anything special in this passage you don't require a PhD in theology to do what he does here Paul simply explains who God is and he calls the people of Athens to repent every single Christian can do that and I hope that if you're listening to this service this morning and you're not a

Christian that these five truths about God will challenge you to consider who he really is God is not some distant far off deity or a fairy tale but he is the one true God and he alone is worthy of our praise and so we get our first truth about God in verse 24 read with me the God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands God is creator he is the all powerful one who put the stars in their place the one who created this wonderful world that we live in as Psalm 97 so wonderfully puts it the heavens proclaim his righteousness and all peoples see his glory everyone is without excuse because when we look at the skies when we see the ocean when we see the snow capped mountains and the wonderful creation that God has made there should be no doubt in our minds that there is a creator and we are called to worship him and as if that wasn't amazing enough verse 25 continues and says God is the sustainer of life

God gives everyone life and breath and everything else as you woke up this morning you probably rubbed your eyes gave a wee stretch probably a little yawn and started your day like every other day but every single thing you have everything that you are is a gift from God even the breath that you breathe is a gift from the God who created you and the God who sustains you as verse 28 says for in him we live and move and have our being God is the sustainer of life and in verse 26 we see that God is the ruler of the nations he knows the rise and fall of all the nations that span throughout history the nations that once were mighty and powerful attributed their success to military might but God is the one who has appointed their times their success should not lead them to rely on themselves or think of how great they are but as verse 27 says God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him though he is not far from any of us do you see that wonderful that mind blowing and that comforting truth at the end of that verse

[20 : 10] God is not far from any one of us maybe you're struggling during this lockdown period maybe you're lonely maybe you're hurting and afraid friends the wonderful truth is that God is not far from you call out to him call on him maybe even for the first time and hear the voice of the one true loving God who calls you to himself and he promises to be with you all the time and then Paul goes even further and he presents the next truth about God that shall blow our minds every single time we think about it God is the father of humanity verse 29 says since we are God's offspring we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone an image made by human design and skill we are God's offspring and our response because of that should never be to worship anything else but God himself and God as the father of humanity is not some stern father standing with the rule book ready and eager to punish those who defy him he is a loving father who has made a way for us wayward sinful children to be made right with him through the death and resurrection of Jesus

Christ and God is calling you home God is calling his people to himself will you listen to the call of a loving of a good of an almighty father God and repent how you respond to that question is important because of the final truth that Paul draws to our attention this morning in verse 31 for he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed he has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead the final truth this morning is that God is the judge of all the world there will be a day when every person who has ever lived will stand before God as he judges the world there is no naughty or nice list there will not be a final chance to say but

God I was a good person as we all stand before God there will be those who are called to live in harmony with him forever in his perfect presence and then there are those who will be cast out of his presence who will spend eternity in his just judgment against sin so why would we worship idols because on that final day no no idol nothing will be able to save us as we stand before a holy God we shouldn't worship idols but we should only worship God because he alone is the one who can save us friends this is not a point that we can take lightly or a decision that we can put off to some future event we must take this seriously because God as just must punish sin and that starts with us he proved this by sending

Jesus his perfect son who paid the punishment for every Christian on the cross so for all those who have repented and put their trust in Jesus we do not await the day of judgment with fear and with trembling but we await the return of the Lord with eager anticipation because we will be with him forever and that is why Paul is standing before the people of Athens and that is why I am standing here before you this morning begging you to listen to the call of a loving father to repent and come to him to put your trust in Jesus and be forgiven people will respond differently to this message there were those in verse 32 who sneered at Paul and then there were those in verse 34 who became followers of Jesus upon hearing that wonderful message of who God is how will you respond this morning think back to where we started off traveling in a new city looking at the sights and taking in the beautiful scenery our world is just like Athens we can walk around the cultural centers of the world and see just as many idols as

Paul saw Christian how do you respond at the sight of idolatry do you see the reality of it and speak into that situation we need to take the message to the world that we serve a wonderful God who is creator sustainer ruler father and judge we need to tell people the truth because he alone is the one who deserves our worship and we should be disturbed and deeply distressed by idolatry and if we aren't what does that say about our lives imagine if God were to take a look into our homes into our minds into our lives what idols would he find as we engage with our friends we need to be so grieved by their sin distressed by their idolatry that we have a burning desire and we are burdened to share the gospel with them we need to speak the gospel of

[26 : 55] Jesus and not be apathetic in the light of idolatry and if you're not a Christian this morning let me challenge you and say that no amount of idols will satisfy no amount of idols will fulfill that hunger that you have the only person that deserves all of your worship is the living God and he calls you to come to him to repent and to put your trust in his son Jesus Christ let's pray together heavenly father we ask for forgiveness for the times that we have worshipped idols instead of you father would you reveal to us the idols of our hearts the things that we have put above you in our lives and the things that we prioritize over you father forgive us and father help us take that wonderful message to the world that we serve an almighty

God a God who is creator sustainer ruler father and judge and help us call people to repent and believe because the kingdom of God is at hand and we pray this in the precious and holy name of our saviour Jesus Christ amen well thank you so much Alistair for taking us through that passage and I trust that it's caused all of us to just stop and to think about the world in which we live and perhaps the things that we are doing and the things that we're pursuing in our lives one of the things that we've been doing over the last few Sundays is we've just been hearing from people in our church family and they've been telling us their stories about how they came to first meet Jesus and it's been so encouraging to hear so many people feedback to us how they've been connecting with these stories as we've just been hearing from people and we said this is the truth about the church of Jesus that it's made up of many different people who are doing many different things all with very different stories about how we all came to meet the one same saviour and so we're going to hear another story now from one of our members who's called

Declan Declan's going to tell us a little bit of his story and particularly about how he now seeks to use the everyday things that he does in his life to lovingly connect with people and tell them about Jesus and once Declan's finished we're going to have our final song hi my name is Declan I'm a member at Brunsfield Evangelical Church I'm 29 and an air traffic controller I'm a Christian I believe in God I'm just going to take a couple of minutes now to explain a little bit about why I do and how that happened for me so I grew up in a lovely place called Peebles in a Christian household and we always went to church and I had a very positive experience going to church growing up there was people who leaked out for me and were very good for me so growing up I always believed in God and as a young teenager I helped out at a holiday club in Peebles and there I got to meet some older teenagers and young adults who were also

Christians and that was the first time I'd met some other young Christians and I got to make some great friendships and get to know them more and I saw that they were quite cool and there was something different about them the way they acted and the way they interacted with each other and just their priorities in life were a bit different and I liked it I thought it looked good and I could see that the thing that was different about them was that they were Christians and I decided then you know I want some of that and so I thought this being a Christian was a good thing and so when I was 16 I made a formal commitment you could say and I was baptized and from then on I would always say I've been a Christian I've always believed in God but as I got slightly older and I went to university I maybe became what you might call a part-time Christian I was still going to church I was still involved in some church activities but outside of that I wasn't really giving God much respect I wasn't considering him in the things I was choosing to do and the way I was living my life and around about this time I got involved with an organization called Christians in

Sport and when I was at university I was very sporty and Christians in Sport was great for me I got to meet other like-minded individuals who were Christian and also into their sport and we'd do little Bible studies and discuss issues that were really specific to being a Christian in sport and it was then I learned how to match up having a faith and living that out and matching it up with sport or generally matching it up with your lifestyle and it was someone I met through Christians in Sport who was I think aware of this sort of part-time Christian lifestyle that I was living and one day he just said to me what are you doing and that was a catalyst for me to think about the way I was living my life and I decided if I was going to be a Christian I wanted to do it properly and so I wanted to look into the Bible more and see what it said and actually if it was true and so that was the beginning of a process which is still going on for me where I studied the Bible and looked at what it said and scrutinized parts of it and I've come to the point where you've probably guessed it that I really believe in God and the Bible and I think it's all true and I think it's also good news which might sound a little bit cheesy but I do think it's good and the Bible tells us that when we become a

[32 : 53] Christian there is a transformation we're transformed from before we're a Christian until afterwards and for me that wasn't a sort of instantaneous moment it's taken years and it's still ongoing but the more I study the Bible the more I get to know God and the more I am transformed you could say and the more I'm convinced that God exists and that the Bible is a good news story and as I mentioned Christians in Sport was really important for me and knowing that the Bible is true and that God exists and that it's good news I want to share it and Christians in Sport has been really helpful for giving me a way to do that and something we used to speak about the Christians in Sport meetings was worshipping God and being a witness for God so in my sport and triathlon I can do that now when we're in church and we're singing we're all quite comfortable that we're worshipping God then but I'm not a particularly good singer but I'm an okay swimmer and when I'm swimming I can still worship God and the

Bible tells us that actually anything that we do and everything that we do we can worship God so when I'm doing my sport I can worship God but I can also be a witness for God and through my sport I get a chance to make great friendships and get to know people and that's really good and I enjoy that but it's also a chance to share sometimes a little bit and sometimes a lot of the gospel and some of what the Bible tells us and so through my sport I can worship God and I can be a witness for him and that's some of what God asks us to do and so that's what I try and do each day and that more or less is my story and if you have any questions about it then feel free to get in touch