

## Thinking the Faith

Most years, when the State Legislature is in town, I get invited to take part in a curious ritual. I walk down the block to the capitol, clear security, and take the elevator up to the Senate chamber. I am greeted by an assistant to the President of the Senate and escorted into the chamber. As the time for convening approaches, the clerk summons the senators to the floor. They take a while to gather. All that backslapping and hand shaking takes time. When it looks as though a quorum might be present, the President calls the Senate to order and introduces me as the chaplain for the day. I then offer a prayer invoking God's blessing on the whole glorious mess.

Such occasions are a throwback to the days of *de facto* Christian establishment, when Jefferson's so-called wall of separation was a good deal more permeable. Back then, football games, inaugurations, and meetings of both houses of the legislature always began with prayer. I'm a little surprised that the Florida House and Senate continue the tradition. Perhaps the legislators are genuinely pious, and really do seek God's blessings for their work. Perhaps they think a fellow in a dog collar smartens up the place (an unlikely possibility, given the reputation clergy enjoy these days). Or perhaps they reckon that they need help from any quarter they can get it.

Whatever the case, it's certain that we Christians have come a long way from the days of Saint Paul. Back in Paul's day the faith was at best a curiosity, and at worst a dangerous counter-cultural movement. Paul himself, before his conversion, had done his best to hunt down and arrest the renegade Jews who claimed Jesus as the Messiah. He no doubt had used his formidable education and extensive training in rhetoric to heap scorn upon those wrong-headed believers who would soon come to be known as "Christians."

Then Paul himself was converted to the Christian faith, and became, of all things, the church's chief ambassador to the Gentiles. He never got invited to pray over the Roman Senate, of course. That would have been unthinkable for another three hundred years or so. No, Paul had to make his case for Jesus Christ in the rough-and-tumble world of free market paganism. In today's first lesson Luke gives us an example of the kind of sermon Paul must have preached many times to the cultured despisers of the faith.

There's a lot we can learn from this sermon, for despite the vestigial signs of Constantinian deference, the fact is, today's culture has more in common with that of Paul than we might like to admit. These days, the Christian gospel has to compete with all the other voices clamoring for people's attention. We Christians are but one voice in what Richard John Neuhaus calls the "naked public square."

The setting for Paul's sermon is the Areopagus of ancient Athens, a kind of court where prominent and educated citizens heard cases and discussed important issues of the day. The seats of the judges can be seen to this day, carved into the limestone of the hill. When they weren't trying people, the members of Areopagus apparently put ideas on trial. It must have been a very interesting place – with ideas and arguments flying back and forth like spitballs in a poorly managed classroom – a bit like the British House of Commons, only more polite.

Well-to-do Athenians loved this kind of thing. They loved ideas -- the life of the mind. They paid good money to teachers to train their sons in the arts of rhetoric and poetry. For them, a man wasn't educated unless he could quote Homer as well as the popular philosophers of the day. Back then, you didn't study to learn how to run a business. You studied to seek the truth. For the members of the Areopagus, the unexamined life was not worth living.

As a Presbyterian, I admire those ancient Athenians for their love of the life of the mind. God doesn't require us to have brains to be saved, but God does require us to use all the brains we've got. After all, God is the one who gave us our brains in the first place. To think deeply is to honor God.

Paul lands in Athens, cradle and pinnacle of classical civilization, after years of missionary work in places like Philippi, Thessalonica, and Beroea. He looks at the Parthenon, the Erectheum, the Temple of Athena Nike, and what does he see? "A city of idols." Paul is a bad tourist but a good Jew. To him the capital city of classical art is a wasteland of idolatry.

So Paul gets to work. He argues in the synagogue, in the marketplace, in the streets – anywhere he get an audience. He baptizes a few folks – not many. The Athenians are a tough audience. Then he gets an invitation to play the intellectual big time – the Areopagus itself.

Paul begins his sermon in good Aristotelian fashion by complementing his audience. (His rhetoric teacher would have been proud.) “You Athenians must be extremely religious,” he says. “I’ve walked all over your city and everywhere I turn I see statues of gods and altars for sacrifice. Such religion! I even ran across an altar with an inscription that read, *To an unknown god*. Well, I’m here to tell you about that God. He’s unknown to you, but not to me.

“The God I know made the world and everything in it. He’s the Lord of heaven and earth. God doesn’t live in shrines made by human hands. That’s where you Athenians are wrong. You seem to think God needs us. God doesn’t need us. We need God. To quote one of your own poets, *In him we live and move and have our being*. You Stoics in the audience: you’re used to thinking that God lives in us. I’m telling you, it’s the other way around. We live in God.

“We are God’s offspring, not these pretty statues. These idols of yours, whatever their beauty, are just plain silly. Can’t you see that? You can’t capture God in works of gold and silver. You can’t limit the limitless. You might be religious. You might even be spiritual, but you’re wrong.

“God has overlooked this kind of ignorance up till now, but no longer. God has fixed a day when the world will be judged by a righteous man whom God has appointed. How do I know this? Because that righteous man has risen from the dead.”

Paul’s sermon comes to a screeching halt at this point. In rhetorical terms, Paul has created so much “rhetorical dissonance” that he has lost most of his audience. Once he starts talking *resurrection*, some give him the raspberry and a few say “This is really interesting. We ought to get together and talk about this some more.”

It’s hard to say which disgusted Paul the more – the folks who mocked the gospel or the ones who treated it as yet another intellectual plaything.

Paul’s sermon in the Areopagus shows great respect for the life of the mind, but it doesn’t end there. It ends with the miracle of Christ’s resurrection. It begins as a careful exercise in classical rhetoric, but it ends with the offense of the gospel – with Christ crucified and Christ risen.

Paul's sermon makes us think, and also shows us the limit of our thinking. Suppose the gospel isn't just an interesting idea. Suppose it's not just one of many options before us in this culture of infinite options. Suppose there is a truth that transcends the babble. Suppose Paul's warning of judgment is as much a warning to our age as to his.

In our post-Enlightenment culture, the individual is the final arbiter of truth. There's your idea of truth and my idea. Who's to say who's right and whose wrong? All truth, we are told, is relative. It all depends on one's perspective. Even to speak of "truth" is to fall into inflexibility and intolerance. In the end, there's no such thing as truth. Truth is what each individual chooses to accept as truth.

We've come so far that now we have a White House that specializes in "alternative facts."

According to Paul, that's a load of claptrap – just so much self-justifying ballyhoo. So far as Paul is concerned, our cherished individualism is just another form of idolatry – a way of worshiping ourselves instead of God.

Is Paul is right? Suppose, for all their love of wisdom the Athenians don't really want to know the truth? Suppose we don't really want to know the truth, either. Paul has our number. We would rather reserve judgment than submit our minds as well as our lives to the God in whom we live and move and have our being, the God whose judgment is revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Paul calls upon the Athenians to think deeply about these matters, but thinking gets us just so far. I cannot *reason* myself into faith. The problem with that approach is that it puts *me* at the hub of the universe, with God revolving around *me*. That's where our culture would have us stand, but standing there will never bring us to the truth. God must be the center. God must be the truth. God must be all in all.

Reason can take us just so far, said Aquinas. Then faith is required. And faith is a gift, a grace, something that comes from outside of us, from the Giver of life and breath and being. Anselm and Augustine put it this way: "I believe in order to understand."

Every sermon of the early Christian evangelists called for *repentance*. The Greek word *metanoia* literally means an "afterthought," or, you could say, a "change of mind" about some idea or attitude previously held to be true. Repentance is where

faith begins. Eventually it leads to transformation, to the radical reorientation of everything. To repent is to stand outside the culture's orientation, to put God at the hub, not the periphery.

One modern Christian thinker puts it this way: *metanoia* is "the unwillingness to continue." "This unwillingness," he says, "is not an act but an experience." (Eugene Rosenstock-Huessy, *I am an Impure Thinker* (Norwich, VT: Argo, 1969), p. 189).

Being a Christian today is much the same as being a Christian in Paul's day. It's an on-going experience of *metanoia*. To be a Christian is to be unwilling to continue in the culture's idolatry, whether it be the idolatry of graven images or the idolatry of self. It is to experience a change of mind that begins with the surrender of self. It is to let go of self and fall into the arms of the One in whom we live and move and have our being. To be Christian is to give ourselves away and to receive ourselves back through the grace of resurrection. It is to die and to be reborn in the likeness of the risen Christ.

Being religious is not enough. Being spiritual is not enough. Being intellectual is not enough. Or rather, all these things are too much because they're about us, not God. Salvation – wholeness – life – is centered not in ourselves but in God, the author and sustainer of all life, the One whom Jesus called "Abba," "Father". In Jesus, God's judgment of our idolatries has already come in the form of a cross, and in Jesus we have been raised to a life that is centered in God, not in ourselves.

Paul's sermon left the Athenians a lot to think about. It does the same for us. Thank God, it's not our thinking that saves the world, but God's grace alive in Jesus Christ.