

Over these last few weeks, while in many ways our activities have been severely restricted, if you're like me you may well have extended aspects of your life, for better or for worse. For example, I haven't done so much walking on a regular basis for absolute ages. Every day my bubble partner encourages our perambulation. Good for us both I have no doubt, although perhaps not quite so beneficial, the increased hours spent in front of the television screen. Fortunately, the latter has not brought us to the desperate point of watching the Kardashians, celebrity treasure island or any one of a number of home improvement programmes. But what we have viewed more of has been some of the food programmes, particularly those incorporating various international recipes and a bit of a travelogue of some interesting destinations. All of which has led to a few new taste sensations coming out of our kitchen, not from my own hand I should hasten to confess.

And amongst the various cuisines we learnt of was that of Greece. So, I was particularly interested to read one of our lessons for today from the book of Acts where Paul is relating his experience in that country and his encounter with the good folk of Athens. Now alongside a taste for good food and doubtless good wine, the Athenians were also tasters of philosophies, beliefs and ideas. They were known in that part of the world for their love of debate, for hearing the latest speculations and theories about all manner of subjects. You could say that they were a people ever in pursuit of knowledge and understanding, always on the trail of truth, but without any real desire to actually discover it or do anything with it. As one commentator described the Athenians, they were always "window shopping" in the marketplace of truth but never buying. Like those who enjoy many relationships and romances but never marriage, they delighted in the pleasures while avoiding commitments or obligations.

So it was that these Greeks listened to Paul attentively, politely. In fact, it was a far more receptive audience than he encountered elsewhere. In other places,

Philippi, Thessalonica and the like, his words occasioned rioting and demands for his imprisonment. But here in Athens? Nothing or virtually nothing. A handful were convinced and some scoffed, but the most prevalent response was indifference. “We will hear you again about this.” Luke records in Acts. How interesting, they seem to say, what quaint notions you do have, all a bit new, where do you get your ideas? And Paul may well have learnt an important lesson there that day; may have realised that threats of violence, imprisonment, and opposition which he regularly met up with, these are not the worst reactions one can encounter. More demoralising by far is indifference.

But not only did Athenians welcome visiting speakers as sources of amusement, not only were they tasters of various ideas and philosophies, they were also collectors of religions. I think I recall someone once suggesting that there were more shrines and statues to the gods in Athens than there were people. Once again with no commitment to any one they gathered up beliefs as one might collect stamps, or coins, or commemorative teaspoons. It wasn't that they lacked religion, far from it, they accommodated just about any one you might like to mention. Every conceivable god or goddess would be represented somewhere in the city. And just in case they might have missed one along the way they had dedicated one shrine to 'the unknown god'. Well it wouldn't pay to offend a deity by passing him by, you never know what adversity might follow. Like the character in the play 'Stop the World I Want to Get Off' who wears a cross, a star of David, a crescent, and a lucky rabbit's foot. You must be sure you have all the bases covered.

I daresay the thought of some undiscovered god lurking in the shadows may have occasioned something of a sense of dread. If they didn't placate him with an altar and some regular sacrifices who knows what might befall them, what catastrophe might be visited upon them. A first century coronavirus perhaps. Well that's the thing you see, the unknown and unseen can indeed create anxiety. Some are presently warning of an expected rise in cases of mental

distress and disorder in our midst as a result of dread of what the future could bring, collectively and individually.

During this past week I happened upon some resources from well-known American pastor and writer Max Lucado. As the writer of the best-selling book 'Anxious for Nothing' he has obviously given much thought to the situation we find ourselves in. That title of course is a quote from Paul's letter to the Philippians, chapter 4 verse 6. Another translation puts it "Do not worry about anything" and immediately before these words the apostle tells us how and why anxiety can be overcome: "The Lord is near". Paul had personal experience to call upon as I said, he had suffered all manner of setbacks in many places, even his time in Philippi itself had ended in a storm of persecution. But he bids the Christians not to fear their adversaries for they are going through what he himself had gone through and is now enduring. Incredibly this letter of encouragement was written from his prison cell in Rome as he awaited the whim of the emperor as to whether he would live or die.

But he knew that his Lord is near, not "unknown" nor far away. Unlike the Athenians vague, invisible, distant deity, the God Paul knew, the God we can know revealed in Jesus, is as real and as close as our breathing. As the gospel for today reminded us, God's Spirit abides with us and is in us.

I wonder if Paul, as he languished in his prison cell, might not have thought back to earlier scriptures and in particular the book of Psalms. For here all the emotions we can experience are laid out so very clearly, from the heights to the very depths. And I'd like to close these remarks today with excerpt from one of these, perhaps the best-known of them all - Psalm 23, The Lord is my shepherd. "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me, your rod and your staff - they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long."

Let us pray:

Good shepherd may we each go forth with steady step as we face the days ahead. Help us to live, assured that in many ways, you provide faith for darkened hours, courage in despairing nights, and calm in depressing circumstances. May we delight in your constant presence, recall your blessings, and walk in the light. Amen.