

Opener

Ask each person, if possible, to answer briefly: Who, apart from Jesus, is your favourite character from the Bible? What appeals to you about him or her?

Worship

As we come to worship God we are going to think about the different ways He reveals himself to us, outside of the specific revelation of his word. Read Psalm 19:1-4a (stopping at “the ends of the world”) and Romans 1:20. Has anyone got a story they can share of a time when God has spoken to them through his creation or by some other means outside of church and the bible? Take the time to share a few experiences briefly and then to give thanks to God for the ways in which He speaks to us.

Bible Study

Read Acts 17:16-34 and discuss together:

- When Paul came to Athens, one of the cultural centres of the ancient world, he was shocked to find it awash with idols. What do you imagine his reaction would be walking into our town today? What are the main idols of our age, and how do they show themselves?
- Paul’s response to what he saw was a deeply emotional one. Do you think that we have lost our ability (if we ever had it) to be moved by seeing people live their lives without any knowledge of God?
- The most striking thing about Paul’s speech in the Areopagus is not what he says, but what he leaves out. Compare Paul’s sermon in Athens to what he taught in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-4) or in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16-41). Why do you think he took such a different tack on this occasion?
- Paul uses no scripture whatever, but quotes two Stoic poets: Epimenides, who wrote “in him we live and move and have our being”, and Aratus, who said “we are his offspring”. These Stoics believed in an impersonal ‘world-soul’ rather than a personal God. Today’s equivalent might be using a quote from the Koran or Karl Marx as a text for an evangelistic sermon. Do you find it surprising that Paul would be aware of and use these sources? What does this tell us about the need to be culturally relevant in our outreach? See also 1 Corinthians 9:19-23.
- Look again at verses 22 and 23. Imagine you had the task of taking the gospel to a tribe who had had no previous contact with the Christian faith. They have a god, whom they worship in ways quite alien to Christian worship. What principles from Paul’s approach in Athens could you use to decide how to introduce the Christian faith to these people? For instance, how far would you say “Everything you thought you knew is wrong”, and how far would you say “Let me tell you the real truth about the god you worship...”?

Reflection and Prayer

Instead of confronting the idolatry of Athens head on, Paul found openings that the idol worship offered through which he could bring the gospel. The altar to an unknown god he saw as a sign of hunger for the true God, and as a ‘launch-pad’ for his presentation of the truth.

- As Christians, how do we respond to the idols of our society today?
- Are we sometimes so intent on condemning them that we miss the opportunities they afford us for proclaiming our faith in Jesus?
- What opportunities of this nature do you see that you might be able to take advantage of as you find ways of sharing your faith in your home, work or social circle?

Turn your thoughts into prayer for one another.