

EASTER 6, May 25, 2014, Year A

- In the early spring of 1978, I was just finishing my first term of study as an exchange student at Oxford. This was before Martha and I were married, and before I went back to pursue my degrees there. My reading during those first eight weeks focused on the history of Christian mysticism, or what we call spirituality. Concurrent with these studies, I met weekly with a priest in a catechumenal process of preparation for Baptism. The two interrelated activities dovetailed neatly.
- At the end of the term, I did what any college student does at that time of year - head as far south as possible to some place warm. I had heard that Crete was the place to go, and I found a travel business in London that ran buses to Athens and back. And so, with a new sleeping bag and a used tent, a flashlight, windbreaker and rucksack, I got on the bus going south. I intended to camp and spend the next six weeks fasting and reading, and alone as much as possible. I brought with me two books, a copy of the New English Bible New Testament, and Thomas Merton's translation of the Wisdom of the Desert Fathers.
- We crossed the English Channel overnight from Dover to Ostend, and then drove from Brussels through Germany to Austria, and then all night through what was then Yugoslavia. We arrived in the bright early morning sunshine in Thessalonica, Greece, the same historic city to whose congregation Paul wrote his letters to the Thessalonians. By mid-day we were in Athens. In just two days, I had traveled from modern Europe to a place where traces of the ancient and biblical world are more evident. Like Rome, Athens has stunning monuments which create the impression that classical Greece may be more accessible to us than we think.
- This feeling is increased when one walks up the Acropolis to the Parthenon, where the results of restoration work brings the building alive to contemporary imagination. Just down the west side of the Acropolis is the

rocky outcropping of the Areopagus, the place where we find Paul at the beginning of our first reading in Acts. Paul did not simply appear *somewhere* in the city of Athens and begin talking to whomever he might encounter. He chose a most auspicious place, one not so very different from the National Mall just below the steps on the west front of the Capitol building, in Washington. Paul could not have selected a more decisive setting in Athens in which to share the foundation of the Gospel.

- Paul's strategy in this important moment in the book of Acts has a bearing on all future efforts at mission. For whenever we want to share a new concept, theory or a belief with other people, we are likely to employ one and/or the other of two strategies. We can stress the *discontinuity* between this new idea and the ideas *presently* held by some people. And, we can stress the *continuity* that may exist between this new thing and what they already know. *The history of world missions has many examples of both.* Christians have sought to share the Gospel in new cultural settings by trying to *eradicate* existing religious practices and beliefs, *and replace* them with the form of Christianity brought by the missionaries. Christians have also studied indigenous cultures and then worked to find connections between existing ideas and new ones commended through missionary teaching.
- One early Christian from North Africa, Tertullian, is remembered for his famous question: *What has Athens got to do with Jerusalem?* Like asking what the Academy has to do with the Church, Tertullian's answer amounted to, "*not much.*" His approach tended toward *discontinuity*. Other Christians, following Paul's precedent in his talk at the Areopagus in Athens, have expressed *greater openness to continuity* between people's existing ideas, and those received through the Gospel. Justin Martyr, among them, wrote of what he called the seeds of truth found scattered throughout the world among peoples and cultures, including those that were pagan.¹

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- In recent years, there has been a resurgence of Tertullian's *suspicion* about possible continuity between the wisdom we find in ancient Greek philosophy and the revelation we receive through the Old Testament. Going even further, it has become popular for people to want to separate Jesus from Paul, and to separate the Gospels from the Epistles. Those who take this approach suggest that Greek thought not only provided *inappropriate* hospitality to a Semitic Gospel, which emerged from Israelite religion and culture, but it then corrupted that Gospel.
- The paradox at the heart of this trend becomes more evident when we learn about the the three centuries before the time of Jesus, when a huge diaspora community of Judaism was settled in Alexandria, Egypt, as well as in Antioch. The common language of the Roman Empire in that part of the world was Greek, and the most widely used Bible for the Hellenistic Jews in Egypt was the Septuagint, the Greek translation. You might be surprised to learn that the majority of Old Testament quotations in the New Testament come from the Greek rather than the Hebrew Bible. And remember that Paul was speaking to the Athenians in their own Greek language.
- From the beginning of the emergence of Christianity from within Judaism, there have been two sometimes-competing tendencies. *The one*, while stressing the transcendent claims of the Christian faith, *looks for continuity* between this new faith, and the ideas, philosophies and religious beliefs of existing cultures and peoples. *The other* tendency is *only* focused on the transcendent claims of Christianity. It then *pursues an exclusivist approach, stressing the discontinuity* between the Christian faith, and the philosophy or religion of other peoples. Both tendencies can be found within the history of Anglicanism, though arguably *the one stressing continuity has been predominant*.

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- To be open to truth wherever it may be found is very close to being open to God, wherever God may be found. This applies whether we are talking about pagan celtic worshippers at an Irish sacred spring in the fifth century or about Buddhist and Shinto believers in sixteenth century Nagasaki. In other words, real truth may be found in the religions and philosophies of peoples *not* touched by Judaism or Christianity. And God's real presence may be found among them, as well. *This is not to be confused with universalism*, the belief that *all* will be saved, no matter what. Just because truth or God's presence may be universally *accessible* does not mean that all will freely choose to accept either one.
- "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows his handiwork." Psalm 19 celebrates how the beautiful ordering of the world reflects our Creator and speaks of his purposes. We find this ancient idea at the heart of a modern prayer, "For Knowledge of God's Creation":
- "Almighty and everlasting God, you made the universe with all its marvelous order, its atoms, worlds, and galaxies, and the infinite complexity of living creatures: Grant that, as we probe the mysteries of your creation, we may come to know you more truly, and more surely fulfill our role in your eternal purpose..."
- Natural human wisdom, though fallen, is capable of discerning traces of God's handiwork in Creation. This is true, even though the Creation also bears traces of the Fall. God reveals himself to us *not only in Scripture, but in the beauty of the Creation all around us*. As Paul knew well, we have the basis for meaningful conversation with people from *any* other tradition in the world. And, we have the basis for sharing the Gospel with them, as well.



The Areopagus Hill, in Athens adjacent to the Acropolis, where Paul met with the questioning Athenians

Notes:

¹ Drawing on earlier tradition, Justin referred to what he called the "*logos spermatikos*."