

The conversion of Dionysus

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Preacher: Rev Dr Will Storrar

[0:00] Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the response of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord our Lord our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In the book of Acts, chapter 17, we read these words. Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus. Some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius, the Areopagus.

In our readings from the book of Acts, we have been learning about the power of the Holy Spirit of God to turn the world upside down and convert some very unlikely people to the way of Jesus. We have seen the Spirit's power at Pentecost to enable a fearful group of disciples, hiding in private, to go public with the gospel in Jerusalem, speaking in ways that everyone could understand.

And we have rejoiced that this same Holy Spirit enables us in Craig Lockhart Parish Church to share the gospel with our neighbours and friends in language they can understand as well.

[1:38] We have seen how the ascended Christ in glory prepared his church for the long haul with four gifts. A compelling message, a compelling message, the teaching of the apostles, a caring community, the fellowship of the church, a common meal, breaking bread at the Lord's table, and a commitment to prayer, always prayer.

And we rejoice that these four gifts to sustain the church for the long haul are the same gifts the ascended Christ has given you to face your future as Craig Lockhart Church.

We have seen the power of the Holy Spirit of God to turn a violent prosecutor of the church, son of Tarsus, into Paul, the suffering apostle, called to bring good news.

To those he wants to stop the Gentiles. We rejoice that it was Ananias, an ordinary church member, otherwise unknown in the New Testament, it was Ananias who welcomed Saul into the church, highlighting God's high purpose for every ordinary believer like you and me.

And simply greeting and welcoming someone on a Sunday or during the week to this place. You are part of God's great purpose for the world, like Ananias.

[3:16] We see the power of the Holy Spirit to persuade the apostle Peter to overcome his lifelong prejudice against people he considered unclean, untouchable.

And to sit at the time of the chameleons and Roman centurion. And we rejoice in our calling as a parish church, a parish church, to welcome all sorts of people into our midst and to be willing, like Peter, to change our ways to make them feel welcome.

We see the power of the Holy Spirit to overturn the legion of patriarchy, dominance by men in every culture around the world, by converting the first European to follow Jesus.

Lydia, a businesswoman. And we rejoice that the same liberating gospel is the one we are called to proclaim and to live out in Keredil.

Here we are all equal, all equal worth and standing in God's image. In other words, over the last five Sundays since Pentecost, we have seen the power of the gospel to turn fear into boldness, hate into love, prejudice into fellowship, and domination into freedom and equality.

[4:43] Not only then, but also now. The coming of the Holy Spirit on the church at Pentecost turned the ancient world upside down and turned unlikely people to the way of Jesus.

And the same Holy Spirit is at work in this church to transform us into one new humanity in Christ, made one through his cross, as we read last month in the letter to the Ephesians.

And now we come to our final conversion story from the Buddhists. The story of Dionysius the Areopagite.

What on earth is an area of great? I keep in mind. More of that later. The conversion of Dionysius concludes the story of the Apostle Paul's visit to Athens, a university city with a sophisticated culture of many philosophies and many temples and many gods.

Here is the Apostle Paul's idealized view of the city of Athens, in classical times. The Parthenon on the Acropolis towers over the city then as it does today.

[6:09] A temple to the god Athene, the protector of the city. This is the great city. Paul arrived in to preach the gospel here too.

Can you imagine what that experience must have been like for Paul, standing there alone in the midst of this great city?

Last Sunday, I conjured up a picture of Paul landing in Neapolis to bring the gospel to Europe for the first time, drawing on my own experience as a student of accidentally landing in that same seaport.

This Sunday, I can also relate to Paul's experience of arriving in Athens, the intellectual capital of the world. 21 years ago, almost to the day, I arrived in Princeton, one of the world's intellectual capitals today.

I come from teaching at every university to direct a research centre whose mission was to bring Christian theologians into dialogue with the leading scientists and philosophers of Princeton.

[7:24] Princeton, with its great university, many Nobel Prize winners, and its famous Institute for Advanced Study, featured in the film Oppenheimer.

The question I faced daily for 20 years was this. Could talk of God hold its own in the city of Iceland?

The Apostle Paul faced a far greater challenge on his arrival in Athens. Could his gospel hold its own in the city of Socrates?

Could the risen Jesus convert the intellectual elite of Athens just as he had once converted the persecutor Saul, the wavering Peter with all his prejudices, and Lydia with all her wealth?

In verses 16 to 21 of Acts chapter 17, the verses just before the passage Tamsin read to us, we learn about Paul's encountering with the philosophers of Athens.

[8:31] Paul follows his usual practice of going to the synagogue in Athens to tell his fellow Jews about this Jesus, whom he had come to know as the Messiah, God's anointed, the Lord of promise, deliverer.

But Paul also goes into the marketplace in Athens, wandering among the city crowds. As a devout Jew who believes there is only one God, he is appalled by the sheer number of gods the Athenians worshipped in countless shrines and temples.

For Paul, the Athenians are false idols, and the Athenians are engaged in idolatry, worshipping mere man-made objects. I wonder what Paul would have made, he said, wandering around the wall a while today, where thousands of people going around in the mountains like this.

Here too, in the marketplace of ideas, Paul is concerned to bring his message. On hearing that two groups of philosophers we learn in Acts, two groups of philosophers begin a public debate with them.

One group are called the Epicureans. The Epicureans believe there is no connection between the gods, if they exist, and human life. Therefore humans should just get on with their lives, making the best of them that they can, living as they please, because they will ultimately cease to exist in an indifferent universe.

[10:06] And then there are the Stoics. The Stoics, on the other hand, believe that the spark of the divine is in everyone and everything. Therefore humans should strive to live the frugal life that reason dictates, despite believing that the universe is trapped in an endless cycle of consuming fire and rebirth.

These philosophies still attract countless of humans in our society. We have never heard of the Epicureans or the Stoics, but believe in living as they please in a meaningless universe, or living according to reason alone, despite believing that the universe has no ultimate purpose.

It is into this intellectual world, our world, that Paul brings his message of Jesus and the resurrection, to challenge the world views of these philosophers all too familiar to us still today. What was the response? Some thought that Paul was just babbling, talking nonsense, certainly nothing to take seriously.

Others thought that Paul was introducing two new gods with his talk of Jesus and Anastasis, the Greek word of resurrection.

[11:32] As Anastasis is a phenomenon now in Greek, we wondered if Paul was speaking about goddess, called Anastasis, who accompanied a male god called Jesus. If this was the case, then

Paul had to be taken seriously. Why?

Because he might be proclaiming foreign divinities, foreign gods. In an ancient world where each city had its own gods to protect its citizens from their enemies, like Athena in the Parthenon. The talk of foreign gods was a threat to the security of Athens. They might be the gods of the city's enemies. Had not the great philosopher Socrates been tried and executed centuries before in Athens on the same charge as Paul of introducing foreign gods?

The philosophers listening to Paul would know of Socrates' fate and see in Paul another dangerous troublemaker. And so Paul is taken and brought before the Areopagus to give an account of what they called a strange new teaching.

We have moved now beyond arguments in the public square. Paul is now on trial for his life. He is seen as a potential threat to public order with all his talk of Jesus and Anastasis.

[13:00] Jesus and the resurrection. And so we come to Paul's speech before the Areopagus that we read of in Acts chapter 17.

The Areopagus was the highest law court in Athens. Named after the hill on which it met. The hill of Ares.

The Areopagus. The members of the court were called Areopagats. As we now consider Paul's speech before the Areopagus, we know that a man called Dionysius was a member of that court. Listening to Paul. Whatever Paul said to the court that day, it changed Dionysius' life. Let's listen in and put ourselves in the place of Dionysius the Areopagus.

Standing in judgment on a proclaimer of foreign gods. A perceived threat to the saint of the city. What does Paul say to the sophisticated court?

[14:10] The Areopagus which has put him on trial that makes one of their number Dionysius become a believer in Jesus and the resurrection. Like every good speaker, Paul first identified with his audience.

He says to them, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, To an unknown god.

What you therefore worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. This is Paul's starting point.

Not condemnation of their false thoughts, which clearly appalled him. As he wandered around the city down there. He didn't start down with condemnation. He started with identification.

He identified with their search for God, however misguided. We should learn from them in conversation with those in disagreement.

[15:15] Not condemning them out of harm, but trying to find a point of contact. On another search too, for meaning in life. Paul takes as his opening the Athenians altar to a God they do not know, but hope to know better.

Paul takes another word. Let me tell you about this unknown God, says Paul. As in fact, Paul tells them that the unknown God is none other than the one true God, who created the world and everything in it.

The God who is the Lord of heaven and earth. Then Paul begins to tease them. This God does not dwell in shrines made with human hands.

Nor is this God serving with human hands, as if God needed anything from us. The God who gave us life and breath and all things. If this is the one you once called the unknown God, says Paul, the game's up.

You could no longer think that God is the product of your imagination made of gold or silver or stone or idols. More than that, says Paul.

[16:30] This God has created from one common ancestor all the nations of the earth and set the times of their existence and the boundaries to the places they inhabit.

Why? Why has God created us in time and in space? So that we may seek God and find God, says Paul. Because God is not far from any one of us.

Any one of us among the billions in this planet. We live and move and exist in God, says Paul, quoting one of their own hugely popular Stoic poets of the day, Amatis, who wrote, For we too are his offspring.

His offspring. Our starting point too, must always be that life is a gift from our Creator.

Like Paul, we begin with the assumption that we are all made in the image of God. But like Paul, we mustn't stop there. Paul tells the Athenians that while God was once willing to overlook their times

of human ignorance, people who are worshipping false gods made with human hands, God is now calling on them and all people to repent, to turn to the living God.

[17 : 50] Why? Because God has fixed a day on which God will have the world judged fairly by a man whom God has appointed for the task, says Paul, by raising him from the dead.

This was too much for some of the members of the Areopagus court. When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some what? Paul's talk of the resurrection of the dead is, closing remarks to the court was a red rag to sorrowful.

He was contradicting the founding myth of the Areopagus court. As told by the playwright Isaac Leeds, whose play described the God Apollo presiding at the very first meeting of the court. In murder trials, Apollo said, there will be no resurrection from the dead. Once you are executed, that was it. And here was Paul, a Jew, a foreigner, now announcing to the highest court in Athens that the creator of Ammoner had appointed a man to judge the world, not them, but this man, the one God had raised from the dead, as the firstborn of a new creation that God will usher in on the day of judgment.

Paul does not name this resurrected man, but they can guess. Paul has been brought before the Areopagus precisely because he had been speaking in the marketplace about Jesus and the resurrection.

[19 : 25] Not two foreign gods as they had at first suspect, but one man whom God had raised from the dead to be the judge of all the world.

While his fellow members of the court were scornful of Paul's announcement, and others wanted to know more, we learned that Dionysius had been persuaded by Paul.

He became a believer in this God, and God's anointed judge of all the world, the risen Jesus. We might say, so what? We might say, so what?

And judge called Dionysius was converted and then Paul left town, so what? I want to suggest to you that the conversion of Dionysius changed the world.

Just as the conversion of Paul changed his world, bringing the gospel to the once despised Gentiles, and the conversion of Peter changed his world, ending the notion that anyone was unclean or untouchable, and the conversion of Lydia changed her world, affirming the equality of women in God's sight.

[20 : 35] The conversion of Dionysius changed the law forever. After Dionysius, every judge and every law court in the world must acknowledge a higher authority, the Creator of heaven and earth, and a greater judge, the risen Lord.

Did you know that every Scots lawyer in this congregation knows that Viscount Stare, the great codifier of Scots law in 1681, grounded by Scots laws, the law of Scotland, in the divine law? And that began with Dionysius. This is what Paul proclaimed in the city of Socrates, a higher authority and a greater judge.

Speaking of Surf Centre in Princeton, the city of Einstein, I was once privileged to host the world's leading legal philosopher, who like Dionysius the locadite, was a believer.

He once said to me, about this time with us in dialogue with theologians, Here, my whole world comes together.

[21 : 55] My faith in Jesus Christ, and my thinking about the law. You see, when the Holy Spirit converts a person, God, not only, changes them.

God changes their world. Their thinking, their work, their relationships, their institutions. The world. And God can change yours too.

Amen. Let us pray. O gracious God, we have been walking through the book of Acts with your Holy Spirit, seeing how you have changed the lives of men and women from the great day of Pentapost down to our old times and this church.

Help us to be open like Lydia in our hearts to your teaching. Help us to be transformed like Paul and Peter who follow in your way.

Help us to be open like Dionysius to change our whole understanding of the world, that we might better honor you through Jesus Christ our Lord.

[23 : 12] Amen.