

A Very Religious People

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[0 : 0 0] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 13th of January 2002 The preacher is Carol Elverson Her sermon is entitled A Very Religious People and is based on Acts chapter 17 verses 16 to 34 About six years ago our three children were given a very special gift from their grandparents They were given a trip to Disneyland and the good thing about it was that Peter and I were able to go as well So we flew to Los Angeles and then caught a taxi to Anaheim the suburb where Disneyland is and by the time we got there it was evening and we unpacked and then we couldn't wait to get out and have a look at this town walk around the suburb of where Disneyland was check out actually where the entrance was to this gigantic theme park so that we could hit the gates yesterday in the morning but also just to soak up the atmosphere of a new city a different and exciting and foreign city and in our passage in Acts 17 beginning at verse 16 we find the Apostle Paul doing a similar sort of thing you may like to have your Bibles open on page 902

Paul was alone in Athens waiting for his fellow workers and friends Timothy and Silas to join him actually we're told in the preceding section that Paul had been preaching and converting quite a large number of people in the city of Berea and then some Jews had travelled down from Thessalonica to stir up trouble for them and so some believers had escorted Paul quickly and quietly out of that town and brought him to Athens and there he was waiting for Timothy and Silas to come along as well so here we have Paul in one of the world's greatest cities even though Rome by that time had become the political city political capital of the known world Athens was still the intellectual capital and it was also the religious capital of Greece and so it was home to some of the world's finest art and architecture and as Paul walked around this city he couldn't help notice the many many statues dedicated to various gods and demigods these statues were lining the main streets they were in pedestals and niches on one side of the street and on the other on street corners basically they were as far as the eye could see there were these statues and they were crafted by skilled craftsmen in marble, shiny white marble, silver and gold and we're told that Paul's reaction to these was very, very strong that he was greatly distressed that his heart was heavy because what he looked at was basically a forest of idols now Paul's routine regularly when he came to a new city was to make his way to the synagogue and talk to the Jewish leaders there and to other Jews and God-fewers and tell them the good message about Jesus Christ and he did this in Athens but also he went to the Agora which is a marketplace where people met and exchanged ideas and so they'd talk and I suppose it's a little bit like perhaps Hyde Park in London where people can get up on their soapbox and talk about whatever it is their current ideas or philosophies are and Athens being a university city attracted a lot of different types of speakers a lot of diverse ideas and thoughts and two of the major schools of philosophy were there the Epicureans and the Stoics the Epicureans thought of the main end in life I suppose was the pursuit of pleasure was to live a life that was free of fears and free from pain and disturbing passions and even free from the fear of death they weren't atheists but they believed that the gods were far too remote and distant to be interested in what human beings did the Stoics on the other hand aimed at living consistently with nature and they regarded God as everywhere they were pantheistic in their view about God and so they developed they had very high moral standards they figured that they had to do all this and they had a very well developed sense of duty and personal independence and when Paul was speaking in the Agora he was speaking about the resurrection and about Jesus and some dismissed him and termed him a babbler and babblers are birds that pick up seeds here and there and the term was used disparagingly

a bit of itinerant speakers who picked up scraps and pieces bits and pieces of information and knowledge second hand I suppose a bit like a third rate journalist in some of those gossip magazines their reports were not necessarily substantiated and their information wasn't really reliable however some of those who were listening to Paul were intrigued by the fact that he was talking about what they thought was two gods they thought it was of Jesus and the resurrection of being another god and so they wanted to know a bit more about this so they invited him to come to the Areopagus to speak there and that was a council that had been set up to listen to educational and religious and state ideas and it wasn't illegal for different gods to be introduced in Athens but it was a capital offence if by introducing foreign deities it meant that the local ones were rejected and therefore because it disturbed the state religion so that became a capital offence verse 21 gives us a lovely little aside into the type of people that Paul was speaking with here in Athens and it says that they spent their time in nothing but hearing and telling something new their curiosity was well known far and wide and we get a picture of people who are pretty superficial always wanting to know the latest and the newest idea but flitting from one idea to the other never quite staying with any of them long enough for a view to be established so then standing before the Areopagus

Paul begins his speech with an observation which may have been taken as a compliment he says I see how extremely religious you are the sheer number of altars and objects of worship can attest to the truth of this and we can almost see the audience nodding their heads and muttering oh yes and sense the pleasure that they were having because of their dedication to all these gods acknowledged by this stranger then says Paul among the objects of worship I found an altar inscribed to an unknown god the dedication of an altar to an unknown god was to make sure that all the deities had been covered and none of them had been overlooked I suppose it's a bit like when you're organising a big family celebration you might send out an invitation to great aunt Myrtle somewhere to make sure she's not overlooked and an invitation to distant cousin Jim to make sure he wasn't forgotten or neglected so it's a bit like this this unknown god was covered just in case there was one somewhere out there and so starting from this inscription

Paul tells the Athenians not about an unknown god but about the one true god and his relationship to the world and to humans in it Paul sees in their idolatry a lack of understanding and ignorance really about God and who is the creator of all there is and whilst he doesn't quote scripture he uses because the bible was basically unknown to these people but he uses his knowledge of God's revelation in the Old Testament and later through Jesus he uses this to give the basis of his answer the world didn't just happen he tells them as if by chance as the Epicureans thought but God had created all things from the beginning and he continues to give all life and breath he gives all that is needed for everything in existence again refuting the Epicureans idea of remote and detached God here is a God who is present and therefore he argues if God made everything how can he need anything in other words

[10:08] God doesn't have needs that human beings can fulfil and yet whilst God is the mighty creator he has made humans so that they may seek him and in seeking him some will come to know him whilst God's presence is everywhere and it is possible to find God Paul indicates that this won't always happen in verse 27 Paul says that the people will perhaps grope for him and some will find him it's an image of someone perhaps stumbling around a bit a bit like me when we had a blackout during a fierce electrical storm unfortunately we're not one of those households that always has a torch with charged batteries just sitting in the right spot so we can grab it so I'm fumbling through kitchen cupboards for a candle and then sort of putting my hand around trying to find the stove where there's some matches nearby so that I can get some light or another image that comes to mind is the childish game of Fireman's Bluff it's a bit like Marco Polo but when we were young that's a game we used to play and somehow I was usually it and I'd have the blindfold tied around me and then twirled around by my older sister until I was almost dizzy and then let go and then I would grope around trying to find the other kids that were playing the game and sometimes what I'd do is find the fence railing or I'd find the side of the house and this is how

Paul's presenting humans in their search for God fumbling around for him often ending up with something other than God in their ignorance the Athenians had substituted the worship of idols for the worship of God the Bible speaks of an idol as can't fit the true and living God a lie or a deception our human response to God after the fall is rebellion and avoidance sin predisposes us to want to be independent to want to be autonomous from God to be our own boss to let us decide our own fate in our lives and not to be submissive to God the Athenians had made idols of gold and silver and marble and so it's easy for us to imagine what their idols were to picture what it is that they were worshipping it's often easy to picture the idols of the world around us you only need to turn on the television and look at some of the ads to see the idols of status possession beauty and youth but what about the idols in the lives of believers

John wrote in his first letter to Christians in 1 John keep yourselves from idols because we know God we can often think that we don't we don't even often think necessarily about the nature of our worship it's easy to think we don't have any idols a good counterfeit banknote is hard to detect it needs close examination and an experienced eye can't see it I know somewhere recently I was warned that there were some banknotes being floated around \$50 banknotes that were counterfeit and I thought well I don't really know if I'd ever be able to pick one up or not tell whether I had one or not and it's the same way the idols in the life of a Christian can be subtle not easily detected by adding anything to the core message of salvation by the grace of God through Jesus

Christ alone we begin to divide our worship of God we begin to divide our loyalty to God alone C.S. Lewis illustrated this really clearly in his classic book *The Screwtape Letters* Screwtape a senior devil writes to a junior devil on how to trip up and distract his Christian patients and he says my dear Wormwood the real trouble and sexual patient is living in is that it is merely Christian they all have individual interests of course but the bond remains Christianity what we want if people are to become Christians at all is to keep them in a state of mind I call Christianity and you know Christianity and the crisis Christianity and new psychology Christianity and the new order Christianity and spelling reform if they must be Christians let them at least be

Christians with a distant difference substitute for the faith itself some fashion with a Christian colouring Lewis reminds us through *Screwtape* that our ultimate identity is found in the message the gospel message alone and adding anything to it subtracts from our worship of God God as Lewis suggests we don't have to deny the existence of God or his character to be idolatrous it can arise as an involvement in something that isn't necessarily bad or harmful but slowly when we have an over attachment to that object it begins to displace our loyalty to God alone and it leads to a distancing and disobedience to him placing God in a remote and secondary position in our lives we need to examine who or what has that priority the usual daily activities such as work or studying our friendships or even our caring for our family can all displace

[16 : 29] God when those things become foremost in our lives when meeting their demands inflates them above God and our worship of him and our priority is centered on those things other than on God the Pharisees of Jesus' day would never have considered themselves idolatrous in fact they'd have argued that they were just the opposite but their idol became the keeping of the law this gave them confidence in their own efforts to receive God's blessings or so they thought by keeping the law they gained a sense of control to know exactly where they thought they stood before God but as idols do they demanded more and more of those who served them the demands of the law became increasingly greater and all encompassing and Jesus confronted this by healing on the Sabbath when all work on the Sabbath had been forbidden the Pharisees had in fact determined what could be done as far as not allowing a wound to get worse that that was acceptable on the Sabbath but anything that made it better was not allowed the Pharisees would never have dreamt of turning to worship a foreign

God but they had in fact turned their understanding of God into something quite alien to what God had revealed about himself as in verse 24 Paul says God has created us to search for him to seek after him we were created to have a relationship with God and there is a yearning in each one of us for that the fourth century writer Augustine put it really succinctly after spending a good deal of his youth seeking out love and friendship through the pleasures of this life and finally he came to know a relationship with God and then he wrote our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you what he's saying here is that when we're not God centred we erect substitutes for God in our hearts to fill that vacuum when we cease to worship God it's not that we don't worship anything it's not that we worship nothing we actually worship anything or everything and as the

Stoics tried you may try to live a good unselfish life morally upright generous to others but no matter how good we are we can never be found blameless before Christ before our creator because sin is a present reality and it needs to be dealt with we can't deal with sin alone our only hope is in God's grace his forgiveness of sin which is found by faith alone in Christ therefore what we need is dependence on God not the independence that the Stoics sought and were proud of having achieved Paul wound up his feet to the Athenians by calling them to repentance in verse 30 stating that God had overlooked the times of human ignorance God had not judged them for their false worship but the time had come for repentance as we review the priorities in our own lives tonight now is the time for repentance for those things that we have inflated above the place of

God in our lives Paul spoke of the new age that had been inaugurated by Jesus Christ and with Jesus came the offer of salvation but with this offer came also the threat of judgment if the offer is refused in Christ came the righteousness of God justice which is either salvation or judgment the resurrection is the proof of Jesus' divinity and it's the touchstone of the Christian faith it was the mention of the resurrection which brought the speech to a conclusion with some scoffing and walking away and rejecting it and others saying well I'll hear about it a little bit later on a bit more further on and some coming to believe coming face to face with the resurrection of Jesus is a life changing event it's a transforming event and it's what changed the timid and fearful disciples into courageous and bold leaders such as

Peter it's the resurrection it's coming it's that encounter that Paul had with the resurrected Jesus that transformed Paul from the persecutor of the Christian faith to the church planter and evangelist it's the resurrection of Jesus Christ that proves that Jesus is who he says he is the son of God and it's the resurrection that gives us the guarantee of eternal life and it makes those who believe in Jesus the children of God while some became believers after hearing Paul others didn't and so may I ask what does this mean for us as we seek to share our faith with others here today I think above all else the speech affirms that the gospel is not a smorgasbord of ideas to pick and choose from for what suits and what doesn't suit for what we may want to hear and what we don't want to hear

[23 : 04] Paul began with where the people were at with their ignorance really very limited understanding and developed his argument from there that he was faithful in declaring the full message of the gospel and it was up to the hearers to respond this is still true today there will be times when we tell others of the gospel and their reaction may be similar but we mustn't attempt to water down that message our job like Paul's is to remain faithful to the truth of the gospel the speech began to an audience who were eager to hear new ideas as Paul later warns Timothy many will have ears itching to hear not the truth but what they want to hear and so too today the Athenians had a heart for religion but they wanted a religion they could control like their gold and silver and marble statues they wanted deities they could sit on a niche allocate a time and a place perhaps once an hour once a week of worship and then feel free to get on with the rest of their lives

God demands total surrender of our whole lives a God who wants us to live each part of our lives aligned to his way of living in a relationship with him my prayer tonight is that each of us will do this Amen God