

Athens A Very Religious City

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[0 : 00] Lectern is equipped with halls this week so that's a great step forward and I of course the paper won't wash. I want to talk to you you know in this about Athens today as one of the cities and but I want to remind you first of the kind of general thesis that were that I'm working on anyway I don't know where you are but you have the coastline and and there's the river coming down and the people begin to collect and the city grows where the river hits the coast and that's that's basically how most cities are started. Well the river which used to be water turns to gold and because the gold is flowing down the river all fishermen gather on the sides to figure out some way of getting at it and that's why we all come into the city we are in a sense drawn into the city by the flow of gold which goes through the city and we want to get a piece of the action as they say. And we have various wonderful schemes by which you can do it. Now the fact is that the city it's inconceivable that humanity could ever accomplish what it's accomplished without the creation of great cities and among the greatest of these cities is that is Athens the one we're talking about today. I want to tell you the city is a great interest to me in preparing this. He talks about the city as being that he says about it that intense intellectual and artistic development coincide in history with the appearance of cities. It is obviously permanent contact with others which frees the human mind which facilitates the exchange of ideas which communicates foreign ideas which permits the accumulation of foreign ideas which also permits the accumulation of enormous quantities of human raw material whose synthesis is to the glory of human intelligence.

So that you find that the pinnacles of human intelligence inevitably gather in the city. You may go off to the mountains to write your book but what you're writing about is what happened to you in the city. And we are drawn as by a magnet to the city. We find our identity in the city and ultimately the city is that place where we can create an alternative to God.

So the city is terribly important. It is the God alternative. What Elul calls the counter creation. Well I want you to have that sort of very strong picture of the city. Then I want to tell you, I want to just read to you a brief description of a kind of CV of St. Paul.

So that you will recognize the enormous stature of this man. He is in the whole of human history. He's a terribly significant person.

Now the cause which he espoused has meant that I don't think he's ever had the recognition that he should have had. But he knew that in the beginning. But by every human standard he is a remarkable man. And this is a kind of CV written about him.

[4 : 19] Born at Tarsus in Cilicia, the three great university centers of the ancient world were Athens, Alexandria, and Tarsus.

He was born of Orthodox Jewish parents sent to Jerusalem as a child to receive legal training as a rabbi from the masters who included the famous Gamaliel.

He was familiar with the two main forms of Jewish life. That is the Jews in dispersion all through the Mediterranean world and the Jews in Jerusalem who were maintaining the old ways.

His command of the Koine Greek language, which was the common Greek that Alexander the Great brought into the whole Mediterranean world so that there was a common language that people spoke.

And his command of that, which was spoken by cultured and educated people of those times, he was able to communicate with all the educated people of the empire.

[5 : 30] He had inherent Roman citizenship, a privilege that included all kinds of facilities, and which even high-ranking officers were sometimes obliged to purchase at a considerable price.

He was capable of quick and clear reasoning and elevated mystical contemplation. He had, in addition, an extremely agile mind, capable of experiencing a whole range of feeling within a few

seconds.

From his youth, he placed all these gifts at the service of his God. Even more than his colleagues, he detested the followers of Jesus.

For he saw more clearly than his colleagues that this sect threatened the very foundation of the Jewish community, which was the heritage of God.

He continued to hold this view until near Damascus it was made clear to him that in combating the supporters of Jesus, he was fighting not the enemies of his God, but the Messiah, the Christ, for whom he had longed from his youth.

[6 : 55] Now, I tell you that so that you will see the stature of the man, and the man comes into the city, and the city is Athens, and the passage you have in front of you is the story of what happened when he got to Athens.

Basically, what he did was he started an argument. And it says of Paul many times in Acts that he started an argument.

Now, lots of people think that it would be more becoming if people didn't argue. It is absolutely essential to argue.

The city that has lost the capacity to argue is dead. And so Paul came in to start what I would consider the ultimate argument.

And the ultimate argument surrounds the identity of the person of Jesus Christ. And probably the main function of this gathering on Wednesday is to fuel that argument in the city of Vancouver.

[8 : 08] And to give expression to that argument. So that people realize that inevitably, they have to be caught up in the argument about the person of Jesus Christ.

Well, let me tell you, there were three levels at which he carried out the argument. The first is when he went to Athens, and this appears in Acts 17 in the verses before the passage we read.

The first thing he did was he went to the synagogue. And the synagogue was alien to the person of Jesus Christ. And the story of his being there was that he went there for three weeks and argued.

You know, our churches would probably be better if the argument took place on Sunday morning instead of after lunch on Sunday. He went there and he argued for three weeks.

He argued from the scriptures, and this was his custom, it says, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer.

[9 : 24] Because the picture of a God on a cross was an object of derision to the whole of the sophisticated world of his time, as it still is.

And so the first thing he had to argue was that that is not an accident. That had to happen. The second thing he argued about from the scriptures was that Jesus not only had to suffer on the cross, he had to rise from the dead.

If he was who he said he is, if he is who he says he is, then it's impossible that death could hold on to it. And that was Paul's second argument.

And then he went on in the third argument, this Jesus, of whom I speak, is the Christ. Now you see, that argument, number one, was given in a synagogue, where the scriptures were read, where the person of Christ was known, where the resurrection of the dead was contemplated, and where the Messiah was expected.

So in the synagogue, that argument was acceptable. And he carried on that argument with great diligence. And as you know, as he went throughout the Mediterranean world, it was the contact with the synagogue and the presentation of that argument that created the Big Bang that gave rise to the Christian church.

[10 : 56] That happened over and over again. But the second level of his argument in Athens was that he argued in the marketplace.

It's called the Agora in the Revised Standard Version, I think. But it is essentially the marketplace. He went out of the synagogue, and he argued in the marketplace, and he argued simply with those who chanced to be there. And among those who were there were the Stoic philosophers, whose philosophy, I mean, who are sort of characterized, or a cartoon of them, I suppose, because this doesn't really pay due respect to their thoughts, that they were passionless, pitiless, perfect people. You've probably met one or two. Who continue in that philosophy. But they were there. They were, in the mind of T.S. Eliot, the exact opposite of any concept of Christian humility.

Passionless, pitiless, and perfect. There was also the Epicureans, and the Epicureans are those people, again, of whom you may know a great many, who said whether the gods...

[12 : 26] They said the gods are there, but it doesn't matter. You can ignore them because they ignore us. And what you should devote your life to is the pursuit of happiness. And that comes right down to the American Constitution, this Epicurean philosophy.

The gods ultimately are indifferent to us, we will be indifferent to them, and we will live our lives in the pursuit of happiness. Now, it wasn't just the happiness of excess, as we might try and interpret it, but it was a genuine sense of happiness.

So he came up against these people. These people called him... I don't know if I can do this, but what they thought of him as was a sparrow, you know.

who went around picking up ideas from the street and propagating them.

And they called him that. They called him a babbler. And that was their response to it. He was a preacher of foreign divinities.

[13 : 41] You can almost... I mean, you can feel the rejection building up of this man. The foreign divinities they took to be Jesus and the resurrection.

These are two gods. I mean, they had hundreds of gods, so a couple more they could add to their collection without getting particularly excited about them. And they felt that what he was talking about was two foreign gods called Jesus and the resurrection.

They were very interested, we're told, in new teaching. And the great thing about new teaching then, as now, is it's usually old heresy.

They enjoyed hearing things strange to their ears, and they enjoyed to tell or to hear something new.

What is the latest gossip? And that was their interest and their concern. So they were... That was the second argument. And you can see that he was dismissed.

[14 : 44] He was dismissed as a seed picker. He was dismissed as a preacher of foreign gods. He was only listened to because they thought there was something new in it.

And when he went and told them something old, they basically rejected him. Well, then the third argument came out of this, because they took him from here to the Areopagus.

Now, the Areopagus is a hill, but it's also an assembly of the elders of Athens. And whether this was in some form a trial or a hearing, we don't know.

But the passage that we read today has to do with his coming before the elders of the city and telling them exactly what it is that he was saying.

And so you get the picture of the situation that he was in. So he stands before them in opposition to them.

[15 : 50] And he says, I perceive that you are very religious. Because if you read, Paul was deeply disturbed by the idolatry of the city.

Now, it's very interesting to my mind that what seems to happen is that as men become more rational and more secular, they abandon religion.

And under the abandonment of any kind of rational criticism, religion flourishes in every form. And nobody pays any attention to it.

And everybody disregards it. And everybody is happy to go off and do their own thing. So Athens, which, as you know, is one of the great cities of the whole of human history, one of the great centers of intellectual life, one of the great centers of philosophy, was a place where religion flourished in the form of idolatry of every kind, including the great and apparently magnificent statue of Athena, who was the focus of the worship of the city.

Well, he said, Paul said to them, in the midst of all this, I came across an altar to an unknown god.

Now, they may have been very charitable and said, well, we've covered every other possibility.

[17 : 27] Let's cover the possibility we haven't covered and have an altar to an unknown god. I think our society would be much more dogmatic about it.

And that is, we worship an unknown god, and we crucify anybody who thinks he is known. You know, the worship of an unknown god is something we are quite militant about.

And anybody who comes along and says, I know him, is in a sense betraying our society. You can't do that in our society. You can worship the unknown god all you like, but don't go beyond that.

I don't think that's what the Athenians were doing. I think they were just hedging their bets. And they had an altar to an unknown god. He then goes on to describe to them the god who to them is unknown.

And he said, I'll tell you who he is. And he begins to tell them. And he tells them, first, that he is the god who created all things, and therefore is not dependent upon us.

[18 : 37] We are dependent upon him. So we don't create idols of him and seek to serve him. He serves us. This is one of the great battles that goes on in every local church in the city week by week.

The essential message of the Christian gospel is that God has served you. And it's not answering the question, how are you going to serve him?

Because until you recognize this first thing, then your service isn't acceptable anyway. But you see, what we do is we turn it around. And Paul says to them, it doesn't work that way.

The way it works is that God has created, and he sustains us. Well, the second thing he said, that God has created the nations of the world, and their boundaries are always changing, and the time of their ascendancy is always changing, so that you have this great civilization, and then it passes, and this great civilization.

And it passes, and then this group comes along, and these people own the land, and then they are moved out, and these people own the land. And this had been going on for centuries around Athens.

[20 : 00] So that who owned the country had been the source of battle for hundreds of years. And which was the dominant group, and how they held their domination, and when it passed.

All those things were looked at. And he says, God has established the nations in time, but it's only for a short time, and within certain boundaries, but those boundaries are always changing.

And yet, it's the changing of boundaries, and the maintaining of civilization that we consider to be our high calling. Paul says, the purpose of God in all of that, is that you would seek after and find God.

That's the great goal of humanity. Not to build a wall around your country, and say, this will forever be our fatherland. Or, build your civilization to the point where you can say, we are the greatest race that has ever lived, and nothing will ever surpass us.

Paul says, we've all heard that before. Those things come and go. The function in the midst of all this, is that you should seek after and find God.

[21 : 15] And then he quotes one of their own poets, who said, talked about the God in whom we live and move, and have our being, who is at the center of the whole thing.

And he said, that's the God whom you need to know. And so, he tells them that. And, then goes on to talk to them about, you cannot represent that God in wood, or stone, or gold, or silver.

You can't do it. You can't do it with the art and imagination of men. It just does, it doesn't work.

And so he, Paul says, goes on to tell them what they have to do. And he tells them, just as, in a sense, you heard the story of his life.

And he was carrying on with great commitment, highly developed intelligence, and an understanding of what the issues of the world were, when, bang, his life was changed, and he suddenly, turned around.

[22 : 24] And so he said, this has to happen to you too. The thing that has to happen in our lives, is that we are to repent. The essential challenge of the whole of humanity, is to be able to acknowledge that something is wrong, before circumstances force you to.

I talked to a lovely lady, recently, who's just been stricken with a very serious illness, and feels very guilty, that, there was nothing wrong in her life, until this happened.

And now as she looks back over her life, she recognizes that there was a lot wrong, that she wasn't prepared to acknowledge. And the, in a sense, the flowering of our humanity, is, when we're able to acknowledge that something is wrong, before we're forced to.

It's a, it's, I remember when I, once upon a time, I was in a university mission in Toronto, and I was sent to speak to a fraternity, on St. George Street, one night, about, what the Christian message is. And there was, sitting at the, they were all sitting around, and they were all fortified with bottles of beer, so they could handle this discussion, without pain. And, there was a, a, a Baptist in rebellion, who knew exactly what I was doing, and so held on to his bottle, more tightly than others.

[23 : 56] And, he, after I'd finished, he dismissed it all, and said, when I'm old, perhaps when I'm 40, I will consider this.

I guess he was working his way toward 20 at the time, but, there's a difference in perspective. But, for now, no. But you see, the great thing about life, is to discover it before you have to.

I, that, that young man, would now be, in his 50s, he may in fact be in this room. No. Unlikely. But, this is, this is the point, and that's why, repentance is, the great gift of God to us.

And it's to prepare us, Paul says, for the day of judgment. The day of judgment is, when in matters of law, justice will be done, and will be seen to be done.

When in art, beauty will be defined. When the value of the dollar, will be fixed for all eternity. And, what it means to be a person, will be established.

[25 : 12] Those, that's, that, that this day of judgment, must come. And then Paul says, and the judge is, God appointed. Absolutely righteous. And, his appointment is confirmed, by the fact, that God raised him, from the dead.

And so, he takes this pagan group, of city counselors, and brings them face to face, with the person of Jesus Christ, as the one whom God has appointed, to judge the world.

And that's, the place we need to come to. And that's the argument, that the Christian community, that's the argument, that the gospel puts before us. Well, the response to this is, and I'll, I'll quit momentarily, was that some mocked at him, as they necessarily needed to do, no doubt.

Others said, we will hear this again, next Wednesday at 12.15. And, but some joined and believed. Of those who joined and believed, one was a woman, which was great, in a male chauvinist society, like theirs, and perhaps ours.

But, there she is. She believed Paul. The other was Dionysius, who was, of course, named after one of the gods of Greece. And the rumor is, that he may ultimately, have become, I mean, this is one of the traditions, that he may have become, the first bishop of Athens.

[26 : 37] But what his name stood for, Dionysius, what was at the center, of the worship of Dionysius, was, the release of powerful, irrational impulses, through controlled ritual, a necessary, cathartic, or purge.

You see, it seems to me, that that's an amazing, sort of statement, because most people consider, that's what religion is, basically. And, you know, I mean, a lot of people go to church on Sunday, for the release of powerful, irrational impulses, through controlled ritual, as a necessary purge, or cathartic, which they go through, once a week.

What Paul was saying, was, that what's at the heart of this, is, recognition, of Jesus Christ, and commitment, of your life, to him, in the obedience of faith.

And that's the message, and that's the argument, which we must maintain. And that's the argument, to which, all of us need to, respond. Let me say a prayer.

Our God, we thank you, that you have, told us clearly, that we face judgment, that the judge, whom we face, is Jesus Christ, and that, we need to acknowledge this.

[28 : 10] Give us grace, to do so, in the circumstances, of our own individual lives. our own individual lives. And we ask this, in his name.

Amen.