

April 27, 2008

Acts 17: 22-31 1 Peter 3: 13-22 John 14: 15-17

A woman wore her hair tightly coiffed. One day her head was itchy, she scratched and discovered a nest of cockroaches. But it's an urban myth. It's not true. That is what a myth is to many people. Something that is not true. There is another way of speaking of myth. A myth is a story that gives meaning, purpose and direction to life. That is called a 'sustaining myth'.

On this ANZAC weekend we have been taken to Australia's sustaining myth with the word *Gallipoli*. Words such as *digger* and *sacrifice* tell the story. Such myths also expand. The ANZAC myth now includes every Australian soldier, from 1914 on, represented by the digger's slouch hat and the Australian flag. Gallipoli has become a 'sacred site', where pilgrimage is made, especially on 25th April. As the myth is retold it connects with what people experience now: it now includes the so-called 'war on terror', with the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. In brief, as magazine covers tell us, ANZAC defines the Australian identity.

ANZAC challenges a Christian preacher. This is a myth which sustains many: families whose members have fought in battle and bear wounds, physical or psychological. It is a challenge because the church also tells a sustaining myth, of *sacrifice*, *wounds* and *suffering*. A preacher could go down the path of treating the ANZAC myth and the Christian myth as the same. So we would simply re-tell the ANZAC story here, highlighting the virtues of heroism, courage and self-sacrifice.

But we cannot simply match these two. We are much more like Paul as he enters the world of Greek culture, in a city whose sculptures and altars tell their sustaining story.

Paul is there as a Christian missionary. But he doesn't take the path many missionaries have: telling his hearers that all they believe is rubbish, telling them to 'put on the clothes' of the missionary. We know that did happen in many missionfields, including among Australian Aboriginal communities.

In today's reading Luke is telling us Paul's story. Paul, the preacher who is on a mission from God. He works with a team including Silas and Timothy. Arriving in Athens he goes first, as usual, to the local church, the synagogue, to argue his case. And as usual, he creates interest, even a ruckus and controversy. Then he gets a chance to speak in the main street: this would be something like a Christian preacher standing in the Shrine of Remembrance and speaking to the early morning ANZAC crowd gathered there.

He is, as you know, a Roman citizen, and he has been educated in both the Jewish faith and Greek culture. An educated man, Paul knows the rules of debate. Every good debater seeks to establish rapport with the listeners. Now, as preacher, Paul seeks to build a bridge of between his Greek listeners and his message. And, in effect, he begins a dialogue with Greek culture that later theologians continued as they sought to engage the intellectual world of the Greeks by their faith.

Paul engages in the market place of ideas.

In a city whose streets are lined with the gods of Greece, he begins to speak. There is an aside, a sort of footnote, put into this text: 'Now the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.' I think we are being told that the Athenians are only interested in something that will divert them, something new to pass the time. They are going to get more than they bargained for.

Paul begins to speak with respect for what the people believe. Although he is distressed by their many idols, he speaks positively of their devotion. He affirms them. But he then directs them to their own streets and tells them that, as he went through the city and looked carefully, he saw an altar '*To an unknown god*'.

Paul is in the New York of the empire; the intellectual heart of the Roman empire. As a Jew he knows

how Jews and Greeks offended each other with their beliefs and practices. Now he stands at the heart of Greek culture and speaks to his Greek audience of what *they do not know*; at best, he speaks of *an intuition – but one that has no real content*. (It would be instructive for us to explore some current approaches to 'spirituality' which emphasise intuition without exploring the truth content.) Or, to borrow Donald Rumsfeld's formulation – here they are dealing with a *known unknown*.

Paul takes his chance. Sounding like a philosopher, he tells the story of the universe; how the unseen God set things in motion, and then set things in place that would allow humans to search for God. The human search is like a search in the dark. Paul says that humans would 'grope' for God, and then would have success in finding.

Such knowledge is possible because there is Someone real, actively seeking to be known. The narrator expects that we will know he is speaking of the Creator whom Jews trust, and know as Judge. And, then, stretching all credibility, Paul then goes on to speak of a man who has been raised from the dead.

Not surprisingly, some thought he talked nonsense; yet others were open to 'hearing more'.

These are educated people. Their culture has taught them science and given them an appreciation of the fine arts. They know how the world works. And now Paul courts controversy by speaking of a man who has been raised from the dead. He has been in prison for it. He will finally be executed for it. In saying it he offends the rational scientist.

As we know from Paul's letters, his offence is not simply that he speaks of a dead man rising; he speaks of a *crucified Jew as risen from the dead!* So he offends the devout believer. Paul's message offends all his listeners, because he is not talking about a heroic death. His message concerns someone who has experienced a godless death, and the unseen God has become an ally of that executed man on the cross.

Paul speaks to Greeks.

A few years ago, an English theologian, Lesslie Newbigin, suggested that we modern western people are Greeks. Our mindset and our way of seeing the world is very 'Greek'. So, Paul speaks to both the Greeks in first century Athens and to us when he quotes a poet to speak of that God who made all things, in whom we live and move and have our being, who is a power for justice, now and in the future, who raises the dead!

Paul speaks to us as Greeks: if you doubt our 'greekness', go to the Shrines of Remembrance and read the words and see the images of 'heroes', of noble deeds, of those remembered for their courage and virtue. Listen to the way it is said we will 'remember them'. All this is very 'Greek'.

So how does Paul speak to us and our sustaining ANZAC myth? Especially as some will say that what Christians have to say is all greek to them!

Paul would speak respectfully of ANZAC acts of courage and self-denial, extraordinary feats which led to caring for others and defence of the weak; then he would want to speak of that which we Australians hardly know, whether in the church or in the wider community. He, I am sure, would point to all our symbols of war and sacrifice and heroes. Then, he would say that these are part of our search for something we hardly know; we are groping for a pattern which makes sense of the human struggle; we are stumbling around in the dark to make sense of the slaughter, the fear and guilt in human experience.

Then he would tell of an unseen power of love that has brought the universe into being, and who has given secure life to us. And most remarkably, he would point to the figure of Jesus, both crucified and risen, as confirmation of that. And then, using even the language of warfare, he could speak of Jesus who is our Defender, who by his self-sacrifice has brought us to the God of peace. And most remarkably, has set in train a process that will finally liberate the world from guilt, fear and hatred. He is God's promise that finally all destruction and violence will end. And the Spirit of life that has raised him from the dead is the power of this world's future.

It would take another sermon for us to explore how Paul's message to people of the first century drew people into a new style of community; those who had been utterly divided from each other were gathered by the story which gave them new hope. And, again, there is no time to unfold how radical these communities were, as they engaged in an experiment. As the Letter we read from this morning

called for :

...have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse, but on the contrary, repay with a blessing. ...Those who desire life and desire to see good days, let them keep their tongues from evil, and their lips from speaking deceit; let them turn away from evil and do good; let them seek peace and pursue it.

That instruction to 'pursue peace' is allied with the instruction to 'love your neighbour'. And even beyond that, to 'love your enemy'. That is where Paul's preaching leads.

Will we give Paul a second hearing?

Perhaps in our world threatened by 'terror', this Christian talk sounds a bit *namby pamby*. Far from it. When Luke told the story of Paul in Athens, he had already been executed by the Roman Empire. He was a martyr, along with a number of Jesus' first disciples.

Those deaths of the earliest generation of Christians led a North African bishop, Tertullian (AD 160-225), to declare that the *blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church*. These were willing to die for Jesus but were not willing to take life in his name, and they remind us that for the first 300 years of the church Christians did not join the army.

This early missionary martyr Paul models for us a way of engaging our own culture and its sustaining myth.

His approach in Athens lets us look carefully at those things which promise to make our life secure, and the acts of human charity and courage that are celebrated. It allows us to look honestly and openly at the destruction of war, its legacy of pain and suffering, its vicious cycle of revenge and payback, the trauma of guilt. And then he holds out to us something that is more than 'myth': a truthful story of the One who saves this threatened world by going into its depths, and by a *self-sacrifice* of love promises us forgiveness, a new beginning, and a new way of living.

That is the story worth telling: a story worth dying for; but never killing for!