

Speaking their language – Acts 17: 16 – 32



Following further adventures Paul made his way to Athens, where he found himself in conversation with teachers of Greek philosophy. Some of them called him “an ignorant show-off”. I find this reminiscent of the way some people today behave on the Internet when they disagree with an idea someone has put forward. They cannot think of a good argument against it, so instead they resort to insulting the person who suggested it. Some politicians attack their opponents in a similar manner. It is easier to call your rivals names than it is to counter their policies with well thought out alternatives.

Paul, however, was not one to be put down easily. Knowing the Athenians’ love of debate, he met them on their own ground. He told them of an altar he had seen in their city, inscribed with the words, “To an Unknown God”. Among people who worshipped many gods, this was an insurance against inadvertently overlooking one of them! From this starting point Paul went on to speak of God the Maker and Sustainer of all. He quoted the writings of the Greeks’ own poets and philosophers. It was clear he was no ignoramus! Then he went on to speak of how God had revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, whom He had raised from death.

Paul's address to the Athenians produced three reactions. Some continued to make fun of him, others looked forward to having further interesting debates with him, and some believed his message. You can't win them all.

In 1 Corinthians 9: 19 - 22, Paul speaks of his becoming "all things to all men". In other words, he met people where they were, and spoke to them in language they could relate to and understand. When he worked with the Jews, he lived like a Jew, and when working with Gentiles he lived like a Gentile.

A while ago I wrote of two schoolgirls who were using social media to talk to their friends about Jesus, meeting them on their own ground. Some older Christians have found that their desire to care for God's creation has brought them into contact with young people who are concerned about environmental issues. They have united with them in a common cause. To be effective in sharing the Gospel we need to get on the same wavelength as the folk we want to reach, and speak their language.

Paul travelled on to Corinth, where he stayed for a year and a half. He then sailed to Ephesus, and thence to Caesarea, on his way back to Jerusalem, where, we are told, "he greeted the church" (Acts 18: 22). Even an itinerant missionary like Paul needed to report back to base sometimes.

A prayer:

Teach us, O Christ, to cast off all bonds of prejudice and custom, and to let your love direct every enterprise on which we embark and every labour that we undertake. AMEN

(Catherine Booth, 1829 – 1890, quoted in the new Methodist Prayer Handbook, Day 28)

- Rev John Barnett

Image: Raphael (Raffaello Sanzi) circa 1517 –20