

Paul's Areopagus speech
Sixth Sunday of Easter (21st May 2017)
Acts 17.22-31; John 14.15-21
John Hayton

Years ago when I was a normal human being and had a proper job my worthy employers subjected me to psychological profiling more than once. Very wise you might think. It was not that they suspected my sanity. They might well have but this was something they did because it is a helpful indicator of the sort of jobs I might be good at or - possibly more important - not so good at.

There are lots of different systems for profiling some of which have been embraced by the Church. The CofE is keen on a system developed by a mother and daughter combo: Myers-Briggs. Lots of Christians use the Enneagram / from the Greek meaning "nine" / because it splits into nine basic types as a system for self-understanding and spiritual development. It is a system that came into modern Christianity via the Jesuits. Both Myers-Briggs and the Enneagram can be explored in immense depth but they are also capable of fairly short / pithy categorisations.

To give you a flavour: *Full of enthusiasms and loyalties, but seldom talk of these until they know you well. [They] Care about learning, ideas, language and independent projects of their own. [They] Tend to undertake too much, then somehow get it done. Friendly but often too absorbed in what they are doing to be sociable. [They are] Little concerned with possessions or physical surroundings.*

In Myers-Briggs-speak, that type is known as INFP. I won't bore you with what the letters stand for. And it is stamped like the little lion on the foreheads of the majority of Church of England clergy. But not me. In Myers-Briggs - speak I'm ESTJ - a long way from that stereotype - as indeed is our Vicar. Twenty-five years ago when I took the test ESTJ constituted only 5% of clergy but interestingly was more represented on the Bishops' bench. Kenneth will be more up to speed on the current situation from his work with potential ordinands and on the Bishops' Advisory Panels.

Or try this: *Hearty, frank, decisive, leaders in activities. Usually good at anything that requires reasoning and intelligent talk, such as public speaking. Are usually well informed and enjoy adding to their fund of knowledge. May sometimes appear more positive and confident than their experience in an area warrants. That's ENTJ.*

I wonder if it is also St Paul.

One of the factors with which I can identify with St Paul – at least from today’s passage from Acts - is his search for common ground for seeking a bridge between self and the other. Or even being able to introduce one person to another person making the connection where there is a connection to be made. And that is what St Paul is trying to do in our reading today. Find common ground. It would be fair to say that Paul had learned this lesson the hard way. Paul had struggled to share his Christian message up to this point. He had had a difficult journey before he arrived in Athens which is the scene of today’s action.

Paul was on fire with the Holy Spirit. Loaded down with it. He was telling everybody. It is always good idea with the Bible to read the previous chapter when seeking to place a reading to see the context to see what theologians call *the situation in life* - only they use a German phrase: *Sitz im Leben*. Well in the previous chapter of Acts chapter 16 Paul finds himself in prison. He escapes and then finds himself at the hands of an angry mob in Thessalonica. Paul is young in faith. He knows he has a message to share and he shares it whether you wanted to hear it – or not. It was a procedure that landed him in trouble.

In today’s passage chapter 17 Paul finds himself in Athens. But he is now wiser more experienced. He tries another tactic to get the message across. When he was in Thessalonica we are told at the beginning of this chapter 17: ... *and Paul went in as was his custom and on three Sabbath days argued with them from the scriptures explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying "This is the Messiah, Jesus, whom I am proclaiming to you"...* [17:2f].

Before he arrived in Athens Paul argued his points. He was certain Jesus was Lord. He presented this certainty in a way that was difficult for the Jews in the synagogues to hear and accept. Particularly “accept.” It had caused problems in several towns.

But by the time he got to Athens Paul had learned - which is hardly a surprise if you’ve been hit over the head a few times. Rather than argue with the Athenians Paul begins by praising them.

The reverse of Mark Anthony in “Julius Caesar” – but with the same intent – namely to swing them round to the speaker’s point of view.

Paul compliments the Athenians on their religious sentiments as evidenced by shrines / lots of shrines Lots of gods. The Athenians liked nothing better than [a] discussion and disputation and [b] a new religion.

So when they invited Paul politely and formally to come and address them about his new ideas Paul starts cautiously/with compliments. He has noticed he says that they are highly religious. So far so good. Indeed, he goes on, they seem to be prepared to worship almost anything and to put up altars to nothing in particular just in case. At this point the audience might have wondered if this was what my dear old Mum used to call "a back-handed compliment."

And right through his speech Paul does this subtle yet sharp blend of flattery and criticism. The Athenians put up lots of altars but the altars are useless. Paul agrees with them that all people share a common humanity and this humanity comes from God and yet they are not perfect. They will have to repent - and be judged.

Paul is building towards his climax the introduction of Jesus. But the crowd isn't ready for this. Paul had correctly identified their religious instincts. My thesis is that Paul is ENTJ on Myers- Briggs where the "N" stands for intuition. He has intuited that the Athenians like novelty / variety. They want to control God through the service they offer God. They think that the best thing is to keep their options open by performing their sacrifices at as many altars as possible. They are aware that their lives are limited and transitory and they seek to find their meaning by seeing themselves as part of the divine life. All this Paul understands but ruthlessly confronts. He tells them that their lives most assuredly have meaning. He also tells them that God in Jesus will judge them.

But judgement is not what the Athenians are looking for. They want affirmation. Not responsibility. They weren't alone. It is a subtext in many a funeral today. One of the more requested songs for the exit at crematorium funerals is Frank Sinatra's rendition of: *I did it my way*. Me me me. Actually I haven't had it for quite a while so maybe it's going out of fashion. I had *Ernie, the Fastest Milkman in the West* for a former Express Dairy employee on Thursday. That was a "first"-and a "last" I hope. Back to the script.

For sure the Athenians didn't want to be judged by a God whom they couldn't buy with worship. The Athenians wanted to buy God - to bind God with the power and the extent of their services to God. But God was not / is not / to be so bound. "You can't buy God:" Paul tells them. God is complete. Completely free needing nothing.

So having demolished their religious props what is Paul offering them instead? In a word, JESUS. Jesus the man appointed by God and affirmed by God through the resurrection. Paul is asking the Athenians to swap their proliferation of religious ideas and hopes and to pin their hope on one man. Jesus. Paul is telling them that there is no easy way no broad smooth highway just a narrow hard and rocky path - in the imagery of John Bunyan.

Paul is asking the Athenians to accept the truth of this message because God has shown it in the raising of Jesus from the dead. But Paul doesn't even get that far with the Athenians. Before he gets to mention the name of Jesus the mere mention of judgement and resurrection is enough. The crowd is bored and unbelieving.

What is it that so alienated them? Was it the very idea of resurrection? Or the smallness of what Paul was offering them? Just one man? And I think that that is what brings us to today.

Sadly, as one drives around there are roadside shrines where people have died in road traffic accidents. Were those who laid the flowers looking for affirmation for the departed or judgement? Or were they just making a memorial with no thought of the hereafter? I don't know and I won't judge which is hard for me because with ESTJ types the J stands for Judging.

Spreading the gospel these days is no easier than it was for Paul. It doesn't work to hit the hearer over the head with the message of Jesus. I can't do it to save my life. Selling raffle tickets is a challenge never mind selling my faith. That approach didn't work for Paul and it won't work for us. But sharing my faith is different. Sharing Jesus and our faith in his life death resurrection and ascension - and Ascension Day is Thursday with a special service at 8.00 p.m but I'll be at the Vatican. Sharing Jesus means finding common ground with friend or neighbour. Walking with them as Jesus walked AWAY from Jerusalem - and that's hugely important - towards Emmaus that famous evening. But what Jesus said later turned those two disciples back TOWARDS Jerusalem.

Our reading from Acts teaches us that no matter how important our message might be and salvation is important our Christian message will not be heard unless it is presented in such a way that it will be heard and appropriated by those who hear it. Our task as Christians is to find that common ground and then we can begin. AMEN.