

Sermon Archive 166

Sunday 17 September, 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Acts 17: 16-28

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



It's a busy place, that market place! Initially people went there for the commerce, to buy and sell. And as we know, commerce assumes competition. I need either to sell my stuff cheaper than you sell yours, or I need to convince someone that my stuff is better than yours - so much so that mine can't be done without. The market place is space for the forming of commercial desires, the airing of comparisons, and the making very rich of the successful. How many businesses fail in their infancy? How many fall at the first hurdle of competition? In the market place nobody lies down, and only the strong survive. Commercial realities. Capitalist truths. The market is busy and tough.

Within the busy toughness of Athenian retail activity, other things grew - not commercial things, but still highly competitive. This is where people went to compare their ideas. Ideas about what you should spend your money on - goals and aspirations. Ideas about the nature of success - riches, wealth and status. Ideas about values - what is worthy, to be sought and admired. You've heard the expression "contest of ideas". **This** is where the contest happened. And contestants were equally vulnerable to dying in this particular game. This very market, visited today by a man from Tarsus, is the same one where poor Socrates took his tumble. Frequently floating his ideas here, regularly posing his questions here, this was in this same market in which he was found to have corrupted the youth. Not a physical corruption. Not a sexual corruption. A corruption of thinking. As Socrates is sentenced to death by hemlock, we learn that in this market ideas are taken very seriously indeed. So we'll keep that element of menace bubbling away in the background. Ideas matter. They can be costly. Bubble, bubble.

On the day Paul enters the market-place of ideas, first on the list of others present are the Epicureans. Their founder had been a man of modest desires, once saying his greatest ambition was to have a block of cheese for sharing with his friends. By the First Century his followers had kind of forgotten his modesty.

For them it had become all about the pursuit of pleasure. If it doesn't give you pleasure, don't seek it. Whereas, if it does, aim high. Pluner that market-place! Swim in the spa pool at Southern Comfort Motel. Watch the giant flat-screen TVs at the Carlton Hotel. Drink the bottle of Pinot at Liquor King - "the toast of Christchurch". In the competitive market-place, these challises are lifted up high. And around them life-ambitions are formed. Around them, pity (sometimes derision) gets expressed for those not achieving them. Around them, admiration gets lauded on those who are. As values steal hearts, what's in danger of dying? What's that bubbling in the background?

Also bringing ideas are the Stoics. Stoics claim that we human beings ought just to accept things the way they are, rather than react to them emotionally. If you come across an injustice, accept that that is what it is. Don't get angry. Anger won't achieve anything. It won't teach you anything. And if you see something that excites you, delights you, don't give it space. All that giving space will do is give you a desire to possess it; and when you don't possess it, you'll just get frustrated.

So in the market place of ideas, float the virtue of the dispassionate observer. Make the idea-buyers feel guilty about their anger. Make them feel guilty about their happiness. Make them feel guilty about any kind of feeling. Then, indeed, make them feel guilty about their guilt - until emotions are strangers and humans are robots being staunch. As our environment becomes more rational, less beautiful and stimulating, and as we convince our children that they should neither smile nor cry, what's in danger of dying? What's that bubbling in the background?

Also on the list of those present in the market-place are lovers of the novel, stalkers of the new. "Time for a change" they say. "Why?" we ask. They reply "just is." Does your current i-phone still work? If it does, why would you spend two thousand dollars on the new model X? When your city already has a perfectly good name, Otautahi, why would you give it the new name of Christchurch? "Would you like to tell me why you dress like that, speak like that, express you attitudes like that?" "Certainly. I dress, speak, express, because that's just what we're doing these days. If you're not on trend, then maybe the problem's with you. Old people aren't wise; they're really just old. Heritage isn't precious; it's really just trad." What's in danger of dying? What's that bubbling in the background?

Not on the list of those present, but clearly having been at work in the market-place are the idol-makers. The city's full of their work - precious looking pieces of plastic. They know that human beings have eternity written on the heart. They know that the heart is restless until it has somewhere nourishing to be. They know that we search and long and wonder. They take the searching, longing and wondering; and they create for it hand-sized, rigid, lifeless things. An object that appears to be sacred - but isn't. Something requiring worship, but delivering no life. In the church, the idol of scripture: fixed old laws cut and pasted onto complex human situations while nothing really fits. In morality, the idol of traditional family: mother, father, two-point-four children, trapped behind a white picket fence with not a rainbow in sight. In society, the idol of "individualism": self-care turned into self-worship. First person singular - not a plural in sight (not an us, a we, a you - not an articulation of community, shared experience). Idol-making. Richness and human-nuance draining. For what is subtle, rich, and complicated, a soft plastic trinket. In the background, "bubble, bubble", something's dying.

Last of all, the Areopagus - a council named after the place in which it met. These were the arbiters of what has a place in public discourse. These were the ones who sentenced Socrates. These are the establishment, the censors, the determiners of who does and doesn't get to speak - endowed, as of old, to declare how things will end in the market-place. The gatekeepers. Does Christchurch have any of those? If it does, then listen for the bubbling, something is dying.

Paul steps into this market-place - this foment of deep and shallow ideas. His first reaction is to hate it. Faith enters the market-place of ideas, and hates it. Is this to be the last time that faith comes into contested ideas, only to express horror and hatred? Sadly not! The missionary tells the brown man to put on some clothes. The missionary tells the brown woman to stop speaking that language. Examples are easy to find - as arrogance bubbles in the background and something dies.

But see what happens next, as Paul receives a question. The question is polite. It's also honest. The market-place says to Paul: "May we know what this new teaching is? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means."

The respectful question seems to enable Paul to change gear. Suddenly he's no longer speaking out of distress and disgust. Now he's speaking to a point of common experience - the experience of looking for the eternal. As Paul had wanted to understand God ("I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection"), so the Athenians seem also to be on a spiritual search. So keen are they to honour the God they intuit but can't yet describe, they've put up an altar to an unknown god. Paul allows himself to dwell in that - the wee connection of holy concern they have in common. He acknowledges that God has made all people, and is for all people, and is stirring "heart and mind" in all people. In a very Greek philosophical way, he finds himself saying God is One "in whom we all live, move and have our being". I wonder whether, as he says it, he's a wee bit surprised by his own words - like in this exchange he also, surprisingly, has learned something about his God - whom he now understands to be surrounding all people in the market-place. Whether or not this is the case, at the end of his speech, while some are not convinced, others are saying "let's talk about this some more". A commitment to dialogue has emerged.

In his little book, *For Freedom and Faith*, Alan Quigley wrote:

[Mutual teaching and learning in the mission field] rests upon a robust faith that God is present, not just within the ecclesiastical establishment but within the society as a whole. It implies not merely an openness to new questions, though that is important, but a willingness to learn. It is not the church's task to bring God to contemporary New Zealand; he is here already, and invites the church to discern the signs of his presence."

Reflecting on that, on the presence of God already to all people in the market-place of ideas, participants in the Knox Church mission discernment process committed themselves to venturing forth into the neighbourhood to look around. Where would they see God already working? Where would they find signs of hope? What would they be enabled to hear amid the contesting ideas and values being expressed through architecture, traffic flow, noise and neighbourhood?

What they **did** see and hear, I'll talk about some more. But for now we receive an anthem.

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