

Yet [God] has not left himself without witness. Acts 14.17.

Having received a mixed reception in Iconium, (some for Christ and others against), Paul and Barnabas make their way to the next city of Lystra, and here there is great excitement. Paul sees a crippled man. 'Stand up', he tells him, and immediately the man jumps up. People come to God in different ways. For some it is by studying, thinking and rational thought. For others it is by the godly example of other people - your parents, teachers, respected members of your church. Today, of course, is Mothering Sunday, which is really about Mother Church rather than just 'mums'. On Mothering Sunday we think of all those people who have been an influence for good in our lives, and such people may indeed include our mothers, and our fathers, even grandparents. Seeing God in people we love and respect can have a huge effect on us, especially when we are young and impressionable.

Other people come to God by experiencing signs and wonders. Miracles, the hard evidence of personal experience, are a powerful way God can bring people to him. Certainly in the Roman colony of Lystra miracles were what the superstitious pagans understood. God always speaks to us in ways we can relate to. He knows what is powerful to us.

Well, the Lystrans were so impressed at Paul's healing the crippled man, that they concluded they must be *gods* come down from heaven, v11...! Barnabas, they thought, must be Zeus (or Jupiter, the *Roman* form), and Paul, Hermes (or Mercury, as the Romans called him). Inscriptions have in fact been found near Lystra dedicating a statue of Hermes to Zeus, vv12-13..

Paul and Barnabas were horrified at this, v15 ... 'We are only men, human like you'. You know, it's rather nice being up in pulpit, and being listened to. But it can go to your head. Imagine the size of *my* head if I could heal crippled people! Some churches have celebrity preachers whom thousands come to hear in mega-churches. But we don't come to hear the speaker, but to hear the message, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is not the Brian Hunt show. It's the Jesus Christ Show. Forget the preacher; it's the Saviour. It was *God* who healed that crippled man, not Paul. Paul wanted God alone to have all the glory. That is *true* worship. Paul pointed them to God, v15...

What is really interesting here in Acts 14 is that this is one of the few places where Paul preaches to an entirely *pagan* audience. That means that there is no point referring to the OT, because they didn't know it! Here is actually a model for preaching to a crowd in modern-day Britain who know nothing of the Bible. So where does Paul start? What common ground has he with them? He begins by getting the people to look at the world around them, and asking, Who made it? V15b... The regularity of the seasons, the laws of nature: where do *they* come from? V17... Surely the world is not just chance and chaos? But note the last idea in v17: 'and [God] fills your hearts with *joy*'. That's a strange thought, isn't it? We all know that human beings can feel joy, but what actual biological or Darwinian purpose does *joy* serve?

As we remember our mothers on Mothering Sunday, we naturally think today about families, friends, love, relationships. Why are we made to want and feel this strange

thing called love? Is it just a biological thing to make men and women come together and parents to look after their young? Is that all love is? So why do we grieve so much when our loved ones die? Why do we feel the heights of joy when we are in love? Who put that feeling there and why?

David Hume was a famous Scottish sceptic in the 18thC. He once said that our lives are of no more significance than that of an oyster! There's no God. Life has no purpose. We're just a bunch of atoms. Our loved ones are mostly H₂O and a handful of chemicals. We are of no more significance than an oyster. Love is just an electrical-chemical reaction in our brain.

Now that all sounds very clever philosophy. But did David Hume really live his life like that? Did he really believe that, say, his mother's life was of no more significance than that of an oyster? If Prof Dawkins' child were to be killed on the road, would he really say, 'Well, she was just a bunch of chemicals, of no significance or purpose'? No-one lives like that. Even the hardest atheists with their clever-dick comments believe in the reality of love, *not* as an electrical charge in the brain, but as something wonderful. When they fall head-over-heels in love, do they really say, 'It's just chemicals in my brain'? Go to the children's section of the cemetery and read the headstones. Not one of them implies, 'Well my little baby was just chemicals and my love for them is just a jerk in my brain'. Every one of them expresses the pain of real love, and they all believe their little child is still alive, 'flying free now with the angels' or 'playing in the garden of heaven', or some such.

No, God has made us in such a way as to feel *joy*. He has made us with hearts to love. That is what we are celebrating today this Mothering Sunday. Families, friends, relationships, love - these are all the things that make our lives meaningful, joyful, worthwhile. Physics, chemistry and biology cannot explain *meaning*. They only tell us *how*, not *why*.

Even the most hard-headed pagans, like the people Paul was preaching to in Lystra, have a sense of God. All around them they see the world of nature with its wonder and beauty and regularity. Einstein, the greatest of scientists, never ceased to marvel at the regularity of the laws of science. The beauty and awe of Mother Earth, the transforming power of human love, all point us outwards and upwards to God. Is there anything more exhilarating in life than to be adored by someone you adore? Why do we have these thoughts? They are God's pointers to him. 'God,' said Paul, 'has not left himself without witness', even to the most benighted pagans. He calls us upwards. The fact that money and things can never fully satisfy us points to our deep longing for the things of God.

No-one is without excuse. Even pagans feel love and joy and wonder at nature. People are deeply mistaken if they think, as they do today, that there is love without God. There is not, for God *is* love. He has given us so many pointers to him, vv16-17... But now is the time to come to God as he has revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ. Jesus said in *John* 14.9: 'anyone who has seen me has seen the Father'. God has hard-wired us to love, to make us long for each other and for him. So open your hearts to God. Get to know the Lord Jesus.