

When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, 'We want to hear you again on this subject.' Acts 17.32.

I can still remember my first day in Oxford. Durham was spectacular, but I had never seen anything like this. Among the great buildings like the Radcliffe Camera and the Bodleian Library I felt like a mouse. It was only a matter of time before I would be exposed as the illiterate I was. St Paul must surely have felt this when he finally arrived in Athens. There on one hill was the Parthenon in all its glory, and here was the Areopagus, the Hill of Ares (or Mars), the highest judicial court. Beautiful temples were all around him and Silas, but more than that was the sheer weight of culture. Athens was the city of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, Zeno the Stoic and Epicurus. Here modern philosophy was born. A.N. Whitehead once famously said that all modern philosophy was just a series of footnotes to Plato. But Athens was also the city of Pericles, the birthplace of modern democracy. It was also where drama was born, the city of Euripides and Sophocles. 'Philosophy', 'democracy', 'drama', 'history' - they're all Greek words.

Into this sophisticated city of brainboxes rustic, provincial Paul came to tell people about Jesus and the resurrection, the *Anastasis*. You can just see these philosophy types, can't you? With eyes hardly open and only half listening they deign to notice him. At least he's new, vv19-21... Paul spoke of *Iesous*, but he spoke in such a thick provincial accent that they didn't pick him up. What did he say? Was it *Iasis* (= 'healing')? You see, he wasn't quite 'Oxford', was he? Redbrick, the poor darling. In v18 the Stoics and Epicureans

called him a 'babblers'... Actually what they called him was a *spermalogos*, a 'seed-picker, a 'gutter-sparrow.' Paul wasn't really educated; he'd just picked up scraps of learning here and there. The clever know how to put you down, don't they?

Paul was nothing if not brave for taking on the Athenian intellectual elite. It would be like coming into the Oxford philosophy department to tell the dons about Jesus rising from the dead. They would laugh him to scorn. Rising from the dead? Oh dear, oh dear! And that's exactly what happened, vv31-2...

Thursday last was Ascension Day when Jesus ended his earthly ministry and was seen by the apostles ascending into heaven. It's more about Jesus ascending his throne than his going up like a rocket. Ascension is about Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords. Jesus is Lord; he reigns. But *where* does Jesus reign? Only where we let him? Just in church? Only in my private life? If Jesus controls only parts, then he isn't Lord. He isn't really in charge at all. He certainly isn't the King of kings and Lord of lords. Jesus is Lord of *everything*.

May I introduce you to an amazing Presbyterian theologian who was Prime Minister of Holland 1900-05? His name was Abraham Kuyper. Like John Calvin, born 500 years ago, he stressed the sovereignty of God, He once famously said:

*In the expanse of human life there is not a square inch of which the Christ, who alone is sovereign, does not declare, 'That is mine.'*

I keep mentioning to you this philosophical movement called the Enlightenment. Most people don't realise how the way we all think today was shaped by Enlightenment philosophers like Voltaire, Rousseau and David Hume in the 18thC. They were

sceptics and atheists who undermined Christianity by arbitrarily removing it from the world of *facts* and placing it in the world of *values*. In other words, philosophy deals with facts, truth and science, while religion deals with *feelings*. Not only that, but these Enlightenment thinkers argued that Christianity was essentially a *private* affair. Your faith was something you kept to yourself. The effect of this has been to push Christianity out of politics, out of social planning, out of business and commerce, out of schools and universities.

What amazing days we have been living through, a revolution almost! We have been witnessing in fact the very effect of pushing Christ out of our public life in the stench emanating from the Houses of Parliament, from the banking world and from society in general.

The Enlightenment said, 'Keep Christianity private,' but Abraham Kuyper rightly understood the Bible when he had Christ saying that there is not a square inch of human life of which he does not declare, 'That is mine'.

And that's why Paul crashes into the philosophy department at Athens. It is only Enlightenment propaganda which persuades us that philosophy is rational, logical, and frightfully clever, while religion is superstition, feelings and irrational. Jesus Christ has nothing to fear from philosophy, for God is rational who made a rational universe which runs on rational, scientific lines. Some of the greatest Christians have been scientists and philosophers. In the chapel of Mansfield College, Oxford you will find a statue of Amos next to that of Aristotle. I have just been reading some essays by

Elizabeth Anscombe, a pupil of Wittgenstein; she was one of the greatest British philosophers of the late 20thC. She was also a very devout RC. Most of the clever Athenians sneered at Paul, but some did believe: Dionysius and Damaris, v34...

When Voltaire and Hume sneered, like the Athenians, at Christianity, church leaders in the 18thC made a catastrophic mistake: they gave in. They tried to suck up to the philosophers. So for over 200 years now, bishops, clergy, and theologians have been altering the Bible to stop the philosophers sneering. So forget the miracles, Virgin Birth, the resurrection. Tertullian in the 3rdC asked, 'What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?' What has the revelation of the Bible and of Jesus got to do with philosophy? No-one likes being sneered at. Sadly the Church since the 18thC has been Jerusalem pathetically trying to justify itself to Athens.

But Paul here in *Acts* 17 does the exact opposite. He has such confidence in Jesus as God's fullest revelation of himself that he made Jerusalem expose Athens! Philosophy, like science, is only a tool, a method. It merely formulates questions and proceeds logically. It cannot give answers. All the Athenians could come up with was a sense of God, vv27-28... They even had an altar TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. 'Religion' is a man-made thing; Christianity is God given, and what God has us is Jesus. Paul was able to give a name to what the Athenians couldn't work out on their own. To their Unknown God Paul gave the name 'Jesus'.

This Jesus is Lord of *everything*, even Athens. He has ascended his throne. So get him back into our universities, politics, businesses, and let him reign!