

SERMON FOR EASTER 6 | 21 May 2017

By chance I happened to be in Chapel Market yesterday. I know that people say that it's gone downhill and isn't what it was, but it remains an important part of the culture of Islington and seemed, yesterday, as bustling as ever, despite the rain. I have got to know some of the stall holders and St James' always get a good rate on daffodils for Mothering Sunday, oranges for Christingle - and good advice about nearby stalls run by other family members!

And you meet people in the Market in a way you don't in the supermarkets: yesterday one of the Pack-Up team was talking about some new medical tests he has to undergo; the vice-chair of the Arlington Association was buying cheese.

So when we hear of St Paul visiting the huge market place in Athens we think of Chapel Market writ large - more like Borough Market perhaps. Mooching about among the stall holders, waiting for his friends Silas and Timothy to catch up with him, Paul's attention will have been caught by a million and one things before he spots a raised stone in and amongst it all, labelled 'To an unknown God'.

The way this is presented in the story in Acts you might think this was almost unique but that isn't quite true. More likely this was erected by someone who had had a piece of good fortune and who didn't know where the luck had come from. Hence: "to the unknown god".

I always think there is a kind of wistfulness about this event. Paul has already congratulated the Athenians on the care with which they have conducted their religious ceremonies: up there on the hill of Ares, a whole range of processions and prayer services would have been taking place all day every day. But Paul can't give up this golden opportunity: they clearly have a feeling and a sympathy for a being greater than themselves but that is as far as it gets. It is a 'talisman' kind of religion - hedging your bets, hoping that whoever is up there is looking down on you!

It's the 'touch wood' / 'say one for me Father' kind of religion. And the market place is full of it - in Islington just as much as in Athens. So why my wistfulness?

Because I can feel the longing for something a bit more satisfying. Dave, telling me about the tests he is going for at the UCH tomorrow – and aware that his dad had died of prostate cancer – would love to know that there was someone looking out for him. But who would that be? He knows that we, here at St James', have a faith and so the best he can do is to 'piggy-back' on that, especially while he is so frightened of what might emerge from those investigations. But he knows that isn't the same as feeling that he has his own guardian angel so it's: *'say one for me Father'*.

In our story St Paul takes this stone altar – a precaution against what we do not know – and begins to unpack for the Athenians the story of a God who not only knows about them but also wants to be known – personally, by them. He instinctively knows that they want this kind of relationship – he talks about the way they were groping for the truth – but he also knows that they haven't the faintest idea of how to discover who God really is.

Turn the clock forward two thousand years and we find a new, well researched paper about belief that will hardly surprise us. Prof Stephen Bullivant of St Mary's University in Twickenham has produced a report catchily entitled: 'No religion: population of Britain'. And in it he observes, again not surprisingly, that the old default of British people - which used to write down CofE whenever they were asked for their faith at hospital receptions and the like - has largely been replaced by 'No faith'.

Which is a bit more honest if a bit depressing. The situation is, he says that 48% of the population now declare they have no faith allegiance; 43% say they have a faith – of which 17% say they are Anglicans – which is about a third of all believers (of any faith – Christian, Muslim, Jewish etc) in the UK. He says: *The CofE as the natural setting of British social life, cultural life, has really dissipated. The people who are still ticking one of the Christian categories are not necessarily practicing but at least they know why they are ticking it. They are, at the very least, committed fellow travelers.*

Now I think there is bad news and good news in all of this. The bad news is the fact that 3/5^{ths} of those who say they have no religion were actually brought up in households with a religious affiliation – but now have none themselves.

And you and I know this is almost certainly accurate. How many families do you know where the parents are believers but the children (and grandchildren) don't darken the doors of churches more than very occasionally – wedding and funerals – if at all?

And why is that? Because, as St Paul rightly points out, the religious faith of so many was based on 'the unknown god'. He was up there somewhere but really had nothing to do with ordinary life - at least not until something went terribly wrong. And by then it seemed hypocritical to ask for help so, hey, *'say one for me, Father'*.

Bluntly put, because the churches have not taught a faith which was personal and relevant, people have lost any confidence in what they said and did: God was too far away to be of interest.

So what about the good news – because there is some?! It is this: Stephen Bullivant's work shows that the fastest decline in faith in the UK is among those whose faith was always very nominal. But the faith of the core group - of those who really do believe - is holding up much more strongly. Those who remain are far more committed and he reckons the numbers will rise simply because - with their backs to the wall – this group are much more likely to work at faith sharing and church growth than those who filled the pews in the past, but with little or no enthusiasm.

So the challenge comes in two areas. The first is to make sure we do all we can to promote and encourage the faith of those who come through our doors, seeking baptism for their children or, indeed, for themselves. As we look to the next five years here at St James', that has to be a top priority. We have to show a living faith - with a God who cares for us and who wants us to know him, love him and serve him. We can't just 'teach about the Bible' and expect that will make Christians out of our young people. They have to see that faith alive and well in us too otherwise they will – at best – only end up subscribing to the insurance policy of 'keeping in with the unknown god' like the *'say one for me, Father'* brigade.

But the other challenge is wider than that: it is the interest we take in this General Election where we demand to know the moral and ethical values of those standing for office. We really do have to be out there, challenging the individualism, selfishness and self-interest of so many who seek to represent us.

To carry through the intentional ministry of St Paul - we have to be out there in the marketplace. Christians may be a minority now but we can be a creative minority, interested - not just in shoring up our churches but in making sure that our concern for our society is also about caring relationships in housing, education, social welfare and the care of immigrants. We can't make a better society with 'unknown neighbours' any more than we can have a relationship with an 'unknown god'.

St Paul's visit to the market place is perfectly timed: it informs the discussions at tomorrow night's PCC. It encourages us to be involved in what is happening politically - and it prepares us for next Sunday's celebration of Jesus's Ascension when young Hettie Hinton, baptised at the 10am Mass, will release the helium balloon over the grass on Prebend Street - releasing not just a balloon but also our concern just with ourselves.

Up it will go: up, up and away, showing that God will always be with us - if we make the effort to stop treating him as 'an unknown God'.

