

WHAT IF I AM WRONG?

APRIL 27, 2008

On this Sunday known in the church calendar as the Sixth Sunday of Easter, we have very interesting readings. Remember that in our church year, we are still in that time of remembering the great sacrifice of Jesus and his resurrection from death to life. We read of the appearances of Jesus to the disciples before he leaves them to take up their work on his behalf.

Next Sunday May 4th is Ascension Sunday when we commemorate the leaving of Jesus from this earthly life. The Sunday following, May 11th, we celebrate Pentecost, the wondrous coming of the long promised gift of God, his Holy Spirit. So, here we are in the midst of the great unfolding of the biblical story.

Today we read from the wonderful Book of the Acts of the Apostle. This book, written by Luke who also authored the Gospel of Luke, is a key document for us to understand the post resurrection period and the beginning of the missionary movement throughout the region. This book speaks to the appearances of Jesus to the Apostles, followers and believers, the ascension of Jesus and the early discussions of church leaders as to the future form of the church.

It appears that Luke intended his gospel to be the first part of a larger work, for the book of Acts is clearly a sequel to it. You might recall Luke's earliest words in Acts when he explains that in the first book he has dealt with "all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day when he was taken up" referring to Christ's ascension into heaven. He goes on to say his purpose in Acts was "that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed," thus referring to earlier instruction.

What do we know about this man Luke? We know that Luke, also known as the Evangelist, was a beloved companion of Paul. He was a physician and a skilled observer and writer. He was a gentile by birth though we do not know where he was born. He worked alongside of Paul for many years especially during Paul's long imprisonment in Rome. His chronicles of Paul's life are helpful to our understanding of Paul's journey as a Christian and his struggles and dialogue with the early church leaders who unlike Paul were centred primarily within the Jewish community in Jerusalem.

The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible says the following about Luke the man: "Luke appears to have been broad in his sympathies, compassionate toward the poor and the outcasts of society, genuinely pious, self-effacing, radiantly joyful, charmingly urbane, and deeply loyal. He remained with Paul to the end, doubtlessly serving him in medical and other ways, and earned the great apostle's gratitude and admiration. Ancient tradition says Luke never married and died at age seventy-four at Bithynia, full of the Holy Ghost."

Let us now turn from our discourse on St. Luke and examine our Acts reading for today. We always need to remember as we read each week that Paul or Luke or any church leader was usually working with people who had heard of the Christian faith but knew very little about it. In some cases they were eager to learn; in other cases they were hostile but wanting to hear more information.

Let us begin by reviewing the lesson from the Book of Acts. This is Luke's narrative of Paul beginning to get the crowds' attention so he can speak of Jesus and God's incredible love for all people, Jew or gentile. This very statement would get attention for Jews were known to deem themselves a chosen people. Yet here was Paul, a Jew of some renown, grouping them all together and addressing them as if they were one people.

Paul begins his talk by noting something he had seen in their town as he arrived. I see, he said, that in every way you are a religious people. As I passed through the streets to this place, I noted altars along the way to numerous gods. However, the one that intrigued me the most was the one that says "to an unknown god". Paul was referring to a common phenomenon in his time. People were very concerned that they not anger any gods including those they may not have known. So they built an altar to an unknown god just in case.

The Roman authorities at this time were very tolerant towards most religions provided they did not interfere with people's allegiance to Rome. It was soon after this time that the emperors of Rome began to see themselves as gods and insisted that whatever the religion of each person in the empire, they must pay respectful homage to the emperor. This rise of emperor worship was to get Christians in a lot of trouble for they had no room in their faith for any other god than the one true God they worshipped as revealed more fully in Jesus the Christ. They were to face death for this insubordination and their unwillingness to acknowledge the deity of the emperor.

In this incident, Paul grabs the attention of the listeners by his reference to this altar to an unknown god. Paul tells them that he knows the name of that unknown god and his name is Jehovah, the one and only true God of the universe. Some listeners were intrigued and others were a little annoyed. It is one thing to tell us the name of this new god but how can you be so sure this god super cedes all the gods we have known and worshipped? And realistically, would you have us dare offend all the other gods by worshipping only this one you now proclaim? You must be crazy!

These people were voicing a concern we hear from so many people even today. How do we know what you Christians say is the truth? How can we be sure there is a God who creates all things and keeps in relationship with those he has created? Can we not honour what you say without being committed ourselves?

Paul went on to say to the people: "Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of man... The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in

righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead.”

Some people on hearing this talk of a risen Christ mocked and laughed. Others listened and asked to hear more. Some remained and became a follower of Jesus and the others melted away.

It is such a human trait to not put all our eggs easily in one basket. We like to hedge our bets: thus the seemingly clever idea of these people to whom Paul spoke. We honour every god even when one is our favourite and the protector of our town. Are we not taking a big chance?

Paul in his discourse and dialogue was appealing to nonreligious intellectuals as well as believers in other gods. In a sense he was saying they were wasting their precious capacity for religion. They were worshiping unworthy gods, small ones that could be contained in an idol or an image. I tell you about the God who was the maker and master of the universe, the source of all life, the Lord of all nations, the indwelling Spirit of every single individual.

He was challenging them and seemed to say: “if you are going to be religious, be religious in a big way. If you are going to adore something, adore something inconceivably good and great. If you are going to have a god, as you all secretly do anyway, have the real God. If you have the capacity for religion, develop it, make the most of it. Just as men and women who have the ability to walk are never satisfied to creep or crawl, do not be satisfied with a religion that uses only a small portion of your religious capacity. Never be satisfied with a gold shrine. The God of the universe I speak of is too much alive to dwell in a thing like that. God once dwelt in a person, this Jesus, and that living image of God is the only image that is worthy of your serious devotion. Furthermore, there is a day coming when you will all be judged by him who is the living image of God.”

So Christians and others have often asked, “If I am already religious in the sense you have described it, what more then can I do? If I worship and pray as I go about my daily routines, what more can I do?” Paul believed every man and every woman was equipped with a natural impulse to pray and to worship and had a natural thirst for God.

Paul’s sermon that day did not have the results his talks often had. There was no violence after his talk nor was there a strong church developed there. Was the sermon then a failure? Many say “yes it was a failure.” Let us think about this for a minute. What are the factors to consider?

First, it is never possible to measure accurately the results of a sermon or talk. Results are not always tangible – lives are secretly touched and changed by our actions and words and we never know. Secondly, failure of our efforts is also the failure of the listeners to respond. Just as we do not always listen to Jesus, so we do not always listen to one another.

So many people are nervous about making a commitment to anything let alone God. What if I am wrong, what if I am going down the wrong road? Might I just embarrass myself if I give myself fully over to God as known through Jesus Christ? Maybe I am better to just listen and once again go and think about it first.

Paul urged people to think upon what they were missing because they never let themselves fully commit to God. Paul would speak of his moment when God confronted him and his life completely changed. The joy of knowing God in a much fuller way is not going to be our experience if we do not jump and take the risk we so fear of being wrong. In Christ, Paul would say, there is no risk for he leads us to God and enables us to discover anew who we are and to whom we belong.

In John 14: 15-17 we read these words of Christ: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will pray to the father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever, the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you.”

We worry about commitment as we never want to make a mistake. But Jesus Christ has no qualms at all about commitment. Only by committing ourselves to God, can we partake of the joys promised to us in our creation. More than that, it is through commitment that we receive the Holy Spirit to dwell within us.

Like Paul, we can not be afraid of failure to convince others about the value of commitment to God. We never know the effect we have on those around us by our words and the example of how we treat and respect people, as we seek to be servants of God in this world.

Be not afraid for I am with you, even to the ends of the earth, says the Lord. If God be for us, who can stand against us?

We know the name of the god others call unknown. Our commitment is to aid others to also know the name of the God of the universe and to discover the joy of being his servant in a needy, hurting world.

Thanks be to God for his wondrous love for all. Amen

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