

Guest Preacher - Mr Donald Macaulay

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Preacher: Mr. Donald Macaulay

[0 : 00] Let's turn back then to the chapter that we read, the book of Acts, chapter 17. And we can read again at verse 22. So Paul, standing in the middle of the Areopagus, said, Men of Athens, I perceive that in any way you are very religious.

But as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription to the unknown God. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. And so on. I found an altar with the inscription to the unknown God. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

This is Paul's second missionary journey, dated probably round about 50 AD, thereabouts. Exact dating is difficult. The author of Acts, Luke, is not with him yet at this particular stage. When Luke appears later on in the book of Acts, as he wrote it, we can date things a little bit more precisely, as we do in the Gospel, as Luke is quite a detailed historian in many ways.

[1 : 30] But Paul then is left, as we see in verse 16, is left alone, waiting for Silas and Timothy in Athens, having had to flee from Thessalonica and Berea because of persecution.

Now, these are cities, or they were cities, in the north of Greece, in the part that is referred to generally as Macedonia.

And, of course, still there, Thessalonica, Thessaloniki as it's known nowadays, is a very well known, prosperous city, and well worth a visit.

As is, of course, Athens itself. And I'm sure we're all familiar with the marvels, in inverted commas, of the remains, the archaeological remains, particularly of the temples that Paul would have seen there in the city of Athens.

I'm sure all of us have seen pictures of the Acropolis. And although it is slightly decayed, nevertheless, it is being maintained as one of the wonders of the ancient world.

[2 : 56] But in Paul's time, of course, this would have been a splendid building, as were many of the other buildings round about. And the Greeks worshipped a plethora of gods and goddesses, goddesses, as did the Romans.

What the Romans did was they took the Greek system of a variety of gods and gave them all Latin names, so that Zeus, the king of the gods, becomes Jupiter, and so on.

And I'm sure you're familiar with many of these gods, particularly Mars, would be probably the most familiar to us, the god of war, and Diana, who was the goddess of love, et cetera, and so on, and various others.

If you're interested in Greek history, you can look that up. There's plenty of information available on it. But it's interesting that as he walks around the city and comes to the Areopagus, which was the central square of the city, there philosophers debated all sorts of things.

And as we read in verse 21, all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

[4 : 28] Greece had been the center of learning in the ancient world for a great period of time. And of course, at its height, in the days of Alexander, et cetera, a major power and a major civilization.

But by this time, Rome has already conquered all of this particular area. But still, the practice of Greek learning and Greek philosophy has continued.

I'm sure many of you, you will have heard of many of the philosophers, perhaps the best known being Plato. I'm sure some of you will have studied Plato maybe in school.

I don't know if they teach philosophy in school nowadays. Funnily enough, they do in Latin America. In all the schools in Latin America, philosophy is taught in the final two years.

All the pupils are given a basic knowledge of philosophy. I personally didn't meet philosophy until I went to university. I remember being quite baffled by some of the things that Plato argued.

[5 : 37] But that's another story. For example, how do I know that the chair that I'm looking at, the red chair behind Toshi's head, how do I know that what I see as a red chair is exactly the same as what you see?

You might be seeing something quite different, but you call it a chair. I also call it a chair. And if we drew a picture, I'm sure we'd have to draw something very similar.

But how do we know that we're seeing exactly the same thing? Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. And lots of other which were to me at the time very stupid questions because it seemed very obvious that we were all seeing the same chair.

But so on. But the more you go into this philosophy, et cetera, and so on, you start to wonder about things. Do we all perceive the same things?

How is it possible, for example, that you and I can come into the same room and I feel it very cold and you feel it very hot?

[6 : 48] And of course, again, that is simply a matter of our own internal body temperatures that responds to the temperature in the room hasn't changed, but our perception of it has.

And so on. And we see two of these groups of philosophers mentioned in verse 18. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him.

Now, both of these words have come into English. We talk about facing situations with Stoicism. Or perhaps, maybe sometime, or maybe when you go home to lunch today, you're looking forward to an Epicurean feast.

Maybe you're not familiar with these words. I don't know. But Epicurean means giving you great pleasure. And that was the philosophy of the Epicureans, that they thought life was for living for pleasure.

Whereas the Stoics were quite different. The Stoics believed in self-control and discipline, ethics, morals, et cetera, and so on. But curiously enough, both groups of philosophers believed in an afterlife, in a life after death.

[8 : 14] Now, this was not unusual. Again, the whole philosophy behind the Greek gods and goddesses and worship of them, et cetera, was at places like heads, a word that's used often in the Bible for hell.

Heads existed and that there was an afterworld and that that afterworld was divided into a heaven and a hell, although they didn't use that terminology.

But you'll remember that in Greek mythology, philosophy, whatever you want to call it, there was an underworld where Pluto reigned and so on.

And if you're into the Greek gods and goddesses, it's fascinating to know and see some of the things that they thought about. But here's the curious thing.

why is it that every civilization that has ever existed with the possible exception of the Aborigines in Australia has worshipped something and has believed in a life after death?

[9 : 32] Has believed how could one put it? It's not just an existence after death would have been the way that they would have best described it.

Why is that? It's funny how we've lost that nowadays, isn't it, a bit? So many people no longer believe in the need to worship something.

And we tend to think, do we not, that religion really only belonged to the Jews, that with the covenant with Abraham and so on, that the worship of God is really only found among the Jews.

Not so. You can see that in the Old Testament. You can see, for example, as we saw a couple of weeks ago, Job and his friends were not Jews, they were Gentiles, but they all had a knowledge of and a worship of God.

You see the same with Melchizedek coming to bless Abraham. Melchizedek was not a Jew. In fact, the Hebrew people had not been descended from Abraham at that time.

[10 : 48] And so Paul brings all this together as he talks to these particular people. And you see, again, something very interesting.

Verse 17, he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews. We saw the same in Thessalonica in verse 1 and the same in Berea.

This was Paul's strategy. But wherever he went, being a Jew himself, his first approach was to the Jews. Now, if you think of that as a strategy, it's quite logical, because the Jews, of course, being worshippers of God and having the Old Testament scriptures, would or should, one would think, be much more receptive to the preaching of Messiah having come, the Christ.

Messiah being the Old Testament word, Christ the New Testament word, both simply meaning the anointed one, the one who was to come. And he argues with them in the synagogue.

And you see that that had resulted in the other places, and we saw it in Philippi before that in chapter 16. You see that that had resulted in them being persecuted and forced to flee.

[12:16] But nevertheless, leaving witnesses and people who believed behind them. It's interesting how God uses providence.

or should we say God controls providence to establish synagogues of the Jews all over various parts of Europe.

And all of that comes from the persecution of the apostles very early on in the book of Acts. When they are forced to flee from Galilee, from Jerusalem, from the land of Israel, and wherever they go, probably there were Jews in Greece long before that, but wherever they go, the Jews establish a synagogue.

And that gives an open door for the apostles and the various other missionaries to enter in and to prove from the Old Testament scriptures the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

You see that in verse 2. Paul went to this was his custom, and on three Sabbath days, he reasoned with them from the scriptures, the Old Testament, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise for the dead, saying, this Jesus whom I proclaim to you is the Christ.

[13:48] Now, as always, when the word of God is preached, there are some who believe and some who do not. That happens everywhere, wherever the word of God is preached.

I don't think there has ever been an occasion, probably never will be, where everyone who hears preaching believes, at least not at first, anyway.

But, again, we could argue about that. And so, Paul then is forced to flee to Athens. He carries out his usual strategy.

He reasons in the synagogue in verse 17 with the Jews and the devout persons. And he also has the opportunity in the marketplace with those who happen to be there.

Now, the marketplace, Areopagus, is the center of the city. And it was the custom that people would come and those who had anything to say or proclaim, much like Speaker's Corner and Hyde Park, I don't know if you're familiar with, where anyone can get up on a box and stand and spout and say whatever ideas they want to proclaim to the public.

[15:11] Except in Athens, it was much more sophisticated, much more philosophical. It wasn't just philosophy.

One has to remember that Greece and Athens was a center of learning, of science and mathematics and so on. I'm sure many of you have struggled with Euclidean geometry in school and so on and all the rest of it.

And many of these things come from discoveries made by Greek mathematicians, et cetera, et cetera. But as he preaches Jesus and the resurrection, they bring him to the Areopagus and say, may we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting, for you bring some strange things to our ears.

we wish to know therefore what these things mean. Now, for the Greeks, these teachings were strange. They shouldn't have been strange to the Jews in the synagogues.

You remember a couple of weeks ago when we looked at Job, Job himself says, I know that my Redeemer liveth and that I will see, my eyes will see him after I am dead.

[16:35] But yet the knowledge of the resurrection is something that appears so difficult for people to accept and to believe. And so Paul begins his sermon in the midst of Areopagus in verse 22.

Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. I could say the same here, open the sermon in the same way. Men and women of Barvis, I perceive that in many ways you are very religious because you're here.

For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription to the unknown God. God. I wonder if this morning you're worshipping in inverted commas at the altar of an unknown God.

You're here, but you have no knowledge of the God that you are apparently worshipping. To the unknown God.

God. And then he argues what you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man.

[18 : 01] Again, this is logical, of course, and again, this would appeal to the Greeks because this is a very logical thing and logic was extremely important to them.

nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything. What does God need from you? I wonder what answer you would give to that.

If you are worshipping the known God this morning, if God is known to you, what does God require from you? Well, all you have to do is look at what the catechism says, that God requires you, first of all, to believe that he exists, and secondly, to come to him in worship, and to worship not just in an outward form, but as Jesus says to the Samaritan woman, to worship in spirit and in truth.

And if you are here this morning, worshipping the unknown God, how can you worship him in spirit and in truth, if you don't know what that means?

And Paul goes on to try and explain this. Not as he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

[19 : 36] Now, again, there's no disputing with that. The Greeks do not dispute with him there. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all of the face of the earth.

There, perhaps, we begin to argue a little bit. From one man, Adam. And, of course, the biblical story of creation nowadays, and Adam and Eve and so on, is ridiculed by the majority of modern philosophers.

Not only philosophers, but by the majority of many people. If you speak to people about them being descended from Adam and Eve nowadays, and therefore having the DNA of sin implanted into their lives, most people will ridicule you.

Nobody believes that anymore. Science has proved evolution. no, it hasn't. No, it hasn't. I don't know about you, but I would much prefer to be descended from an Adam and an Eve than from a monkey.

But that's what so many people like to think nowadays. But Paul goes on. He says, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God.

[21 : 04] And perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. And there's the promise behind that in Scripture, that if you seek God, you will find him.

But you have to seek him with your whole heart. He is actually not far from us. For in him we live and move and have our being.

He is the sovereign God. He controls everything. Your life, your breath, everything is in his hands. Indeed, notice how clever Paul is in his sermon.

He even quotes one of their own poets. Some of your own poets have said, for we are indeed his offspring. This comes from a poet called Aratus, who wrote, probably have a footnote on it, who wrote a poem which still survives, and yet he speaks, we are his offspring.

So therefore, being God's offspring, since we are produced, descended from a product of God's creation, whatever way you want to look at it, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art of and imagination of man.

[22 : 27] At times of ignorance, God has overlooked, but now he commands all people, that's you and I, everywhere, to repent, because he has fixed a judgment day, and he has given assurance of this by raising the man whom he has appointed to judge from the dead.

Now, there comes the stumbling block for the logical mind, for the philosophical mind. How is it possible to raise someone from the dead?

dead? I know many people have argued with who have said, well, if I saw someone being raised from the dead, then I might believe.

The Old Testament has at least two cases of people being raised from the dead. If not more, I can only remember two right now.

but the fact that Jesus was raised from the dead by God not only was proved by those who saw him, and you remember that for forty days he continued after his resurrection, but it was promised from the beginning of the Old Testament.

[23 : 55] and therefore the Jews in a sense had no excuse for not accepting that Jesus was the Messiah. It's curious, isn't it, that even to this day, particularly the Orthodox Jews, refuse point blank to believe in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, to believe that he is the Messiah.

Indeed, in most of the Jewish scriptures, you find that Isaiah 53 is removed from it so that they do not have the prophecy of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, the suffering servant.

And you see the reaction that people have here. Now, when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, but others said, we will hear you again about this.

I have to ask you this morning, which group are you in? Are you in the group that mocks the resurrection of the dead?

Or is it something that you actually believe? And I don't just mean the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. I mean also your own resurrection.

[25 : 17] resurrection. Is that something that you can cope with in your own mind? That one day, even although your body will be, as Job puts it, eaten by worms, et cetera, and so on, that one day in your flesh you will see God.

That there will come a time when wherever you're buried, incinerated, or cremated, or whatever you are, drowned at sea, et cetera, wherever people die, the bodies will rise again.

It does seem, one has to admit that logically it seems impossible. How would it be possible for the bodies of the martyrs who were burnt at the stake, for their ashes to come together into a resurrection body?

what does Jesus say? He says, with God nothing is impossible. Nothing is impossible. The very God who formed us from the dust of the earth originally, why would he not be perfectly capable of resurrecting ashes, bones that have decayed?

you see in Ezekiel, the vision that Ezekiel has given in the valley of dry bones, can these bones live again? And of course, what happens?

[26 : 52] Ezekiel says, Lord, you know, the bones come together, but there's no spirit into them until God breathes the breath of life into them.

and perhaps in our scientific day and age where we are so advanced as a civilization, we know so much, we are so technically and scientifically minded, no wonder people mock.

We will hear you again about this. I wonder if they did. So Paul went out from their midst, but you notice that some, some people, some men joined him and believed, and we have one particularly mentioned, Dionysius the Areopagite.

Now the very name Areopagite from Areopagus suggests that he was a guy who was here as one of the philosophers and main speakers, and yet he is convinced that Paul is speaking the truth.

And a woman named Damaris and others with them. And whenever the gospel is preached, there are some who believe and some who mock and some who say, we'll hear you again about this later on, later on when we have a more convenient time.

[28 : 31] There are others who say, yes, I believe all that, but I'm going to leave it until I'm older, until I have more time to think about it.

I've got too many other things, too many life projects to deal with just now. I'm too busy, too busy with children, with family, with job, with etc., etc., career, etc., etc.

any excuse to postpone it. But you forget that tomorrow is not promised, and you forget that even when you become older, you may not have the mental faculties or the mental health to be able to deal with thinking about these things.

What does Scripture say? It says now is the accepted time. Now. Not tomorrow, not next week, but now. Sad to think, isn't it?

As far as we know from Scripture, Paul never visited Athens again. There is no mention of a visit to Athens in any of the other, the rest of the book of Acts.

[29 : 59] There is no letter to a church in Athens. That doesn't necessarily mean that there wasn't a church in Athens.

The few believers who were there maybe, well, did form a church or a small group or whatever we want to call it. But Scripture is silent about what happened in Athens after that.

Unlike the other Greek cities, Thessalonica, Philippi, Corinth, we see not only letters, but thriving churches in those parts of Greece when Paul is writing to them.

Where are they today, these churches? Have they disappeared? Well, again, it's a very interesting story.

If you go into the history of the church, you find, of course, that the Greek Orthodox Church is one of the churches that splits away from the church centered in Rome.

[31 : 11] Now, I don't mean the Roman Catholic Church, I mean the Holy Catholic Church, Catholic in the sense of the universal church. When the church becomes centered in Rome, and later domination of the popes, etc., bring in certain things, the Orthodox churches in the East split

from Rome.

And so it is still, if you go to Greece nowadays, I'm sure many of you may have been on holiday, you'll find the typical circular churches built in many cities, and they are Greek Orthodox churches. And their worship is very fervent, very devout, and very, very based on Scripture, very similar to the worship that takes place in, for example, the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt, and so on.

And they are churches where, although they may have an outward feeling of pomp and circumstance, and so on, nevertheless, there are many devoted Christians within them.

Was that Paul's legacy? We don't know in terms of Athens. We know in various other parts of Greece, and in various parts of what is called Turkey nowadays, because, again, of the letters that we have, that these churches survived for a period of time.

[32 : 42] But again, if you look historically, it's interesting, isn't it? It's not so long ago, there was no church in Barbos. You only have to go back just a little over 150 years.

The only churches on the island were in Stornoway. The Vikings eliminated Christianity from the Isles way back in the 8th or 7th, 6th, 7th, 8th centuries, round about there.

We know that the Columbus and Columban missionaries were here before that. But when the Vikings conquer the Western Isles, Christianity is eliminated, and it doesn't come back for a long time.

And yet, here we are this morning, and I have to remind you again of what Paul says. Who are you worshipping? Are you worshipping the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ?

Or are you worshipping at the altar of an unknown God? An unknown God who is not known to you personally. Or you know about him. You know, maybe even you know the Bible quite well.

[33 : 58] But you haven't come to a personal faith. God's And you cannot come to a personal faith until you believe and accept that not only did the Lord Jesus die on the cross of Calvary and pour out his blood to cleanse you from sin, for without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin.

And that's a question this morning that you have to answer for yourself. Who are you worshipping this morning?

May the Lord bless these thoughts to us. Let us pray. Our Father which art in heaven, we thank you, O Lord, that you can bring us to meditate upon these things.

Help us through faith to believe what your word says, that your Holy Spirit would convince us of the resurrection, of the atonement rendered by the Lord Jesus Christ and the blood that cleanses from all sin.

And that this is an urgent pressing matter, that today if you hear his voice, that you respond to it. Pour out your Holy Spirit upon us and be with anyone here who is struggling to believe, to understand these things.

[35 : 24] Open their minds and their hearts to see you in your glory. Be with us now as we conclude our worship and pardon sin through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. Let us conclude then by singing in Psalm 49, the same psalm as we had on page 275.

Psalm 49, at verse 16, we'll sing down to the bottom of the page.

page 275. Be thou not then afraid when one in Richard thou dost see, nor when the glory of his house advanced it is on high.

For he shall carry nothing hence when death his days doth end, nor shall his glory after him into the grave descend. although he his own soul did bless, while he on earth did live, and when thou to thyself dost dwell, men will thee praises give.

He to his father's race shall go, they never shall see light. Man honoured, wanting knowledge, is like beasts that perish quite.

[36 : 39] Let's sing these verses then in conclusion. Psalm 49, at verse 16, Be Thou Not Then Afraid. Be Thou Not Then Afraid When one then where Shelf Thou Dost See, Nor when the Glory of Christmas Advanced is on high, for he shall carry nothing hence when death is nor shall his glory

His own soul did rest whilst he on earth did live.

And when thou to thyself dost well, and with thee priceless care, he to his father's rich shall go.

They never trust delight, man on earth born in all ages, like peace that perish quite.

Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and forever. Amen.