

**Chalmers Church – Some of the Sunday service at Home!**

**Produced by Rev Robin Allison, Minister at Cockenzie and Port Seton: Chalmers Memorial Church**

**The text below can also be heard in audio version at <https://chalmersmemorialchurch2020.podbean.com/>**

**It will also be available to listen to for one week from Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> September 2020 via telephone. The number to dial is 01875 444 495.**

**Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

**Introduction**

Hello and welcome to this podcast. My name is Robin Allison and I am the Minister at Cockenzie and Port Seton: Chalmers Memorial Church.

We've now been posting and distributing these podcasts, I realised the other day, for the best part of 6 months now. Without being able to come to the Church building itself, to enjoy the intimacy and beauty of our sanctuary, to sing and to pray we've had to find different ways to keep our spiritual batteries, as it were, at or as near full charge as we can. It's been a privilege to have played even a small part in that for my own congregation and to know that others too – on occasion or even every week – have tuned in to hear the weekly message. You have my thanks.

You may have heard, if you live locally in Cockenzie and Port Seton, that we are beginning the first tentative steps back into our Church premises for worship. Commencing on the 16<sup>th</sup> September we'll be starting a series of 4 midweek services in our Church hall before, hopefully in the first half of October, opening up on a Sunday morning too. That would mean, with limited numbers at both services, that there will be two opportunities for worship each week.

All members and adherents of Chalmers Church will be receiving a newsletter with more details from their own elders in the next few days. We have agreed, however, that these podcasts will continue for a while longer yet so that those who are not able yet to come to worship in our building can have worship brought to them. After all, if we've learnt anything during lockdown it is that God loves our worship whether it is in a church building, a Livingroom, a study or even at the Kitchen table – wherever it is that that we make space in that daily and weekly routine to spend to time with God.

Today, we're going to be taking a look at one of my own personal favourite bible passages in which Paul brings worship not to a Livingroom in someone's house but into a City square in Athens where he meets people deep in discussion... As they talk Paul joins their words with talk of Jesus. It's a truly fascinating conversation.

But more of that in a moment, however. Shall we, first of all, pray?

**Let us pray...**

**Opening prayer and Lord's Prayer**

Our loving heavenly Father, we come to you this day to be aware of your presence and to be reassured once again by your gracious love for us. We come to you so that we might gather in your name – and in the name of Christ – so that, through our worship, we might know that you are Lord of our lives and of our living.

In the daily waywardness of life – when it is sometimes hard to know which way to turn or which decisions to make – we have been aware of your steadiness.

When we have been tempted to compromise over what to do and how to do it... tempted to leave things half-finished or even leave them undone we have sensed your call to service, reminding us through your Holy Spirit that we still have so much to do.

Father, forgive us we pray for losing that sense of focus...

Forgive us for our pick and mix attitude to the things of your kingdom... choosing that which makes us feel warm and comfortable but leaving out the things which challenge and change.

As we worship you this day we pray that you would dwell in our midst, inspiring us to fulfil the call you have placed upon us, reassured that in all we seek to do in your name that you are with us even now wherever we are.

And hear us now as we bring these our prayers to you in the words which Jesus has taught us to say in the Lord's prayer:

*Our Father*

*who art in heaven*

*Hallowed be thy name*

*Thy kingdom come*

*Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

*Give us this day our daily bread*

*And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors*

*And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil*

*For thine is the kingdom, and the power*

*and the glory, for ever, Amen.*

### **Bible Reading – Acts chapter 17 verses 16 to 34**

*16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. 17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the market-place day by day with those who happened to be there. 18 A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, 'What is this babbling trying to say?' Others remarked, 'He seems to be advocating foreign gods.' They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. 19 Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.' 21 (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)*

*22 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: 'People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 23 For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So, you are ignorant of the very thing you worship – and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.*

*24 'The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. 25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he*

*needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. 26 From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. 27 God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 28 “For in him we live and move and have our being.” As some of your own poets have said, “We are his offspring.”*

*29 ‘Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by human design and skill. 30 In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 31 For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.’*

*32 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.’ 33 At that, Paul left the Council. 34 Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.*

**Amen and thanks be to God for this reading of His Holy Word and to his name be the praise and the glory.**

### Reflection

Paul’s journey towards Athens had not been a particularly easy one because in both of the places he’d been before he arrived there, he did not have such an easy time of it.

Last week, our Bible reading was set in the context of Paul’s visit to the city of Thessalonica and, as we discovered then, after hearing him preach in the local synagogue, some of the local Jews had taken great umbridge at Paul’s teaching about the death and resurrection of Jesus.

In fact, they were so upset that Paul and Silas had needed to flee from the scene taking refuge in the house of a new convert called Jason. But soon after, we realised, these same disgruntled individuals were busy roaming the streets looking for Paul. Their intent was not good, and it was only due to him being whisked off by some fellow believers that Paul and his cohort were able to escape.

This time they head off to a place called Berea which was located in what is now the North of Greece. Now, sometimes people move to a new place to leave the so-called battles of the past behind. A new place to stay, a new street, a new village, town or city marks a chance for a new start. And mostly, for most folk, that’s true – especially if your leaving a place that has caused distress to you in the past. Anyway, the Bereans themselves seemed warm and welcoming.

At chapter 17 and verse 11 Luke, the writer of Acts, perhaps shows a modicum of bias when he describes the Bereans as (quote) *“of more noble character than those in Thessalonica”*. I think we are simply meant to read that as meaning that they didn’t chase Paul out of town!

Occasionally, however, trouble has a habit of following us, especially unresolved trouble which happened again when some of the cohort from Thessalonica made their way to Berea, pursuing Paul relentlessly from one town and village to another. So, Paul tells Silas and Timothy, his companions on this journey, to stay put in Berea and he leaves - this time for Athens - on his own.

Now, its with stories like this that I sometimes wonder that Paul might have made a good wrestler in the WWE All in American Wrestling Team because he's like the wrestler that has been thrown over the top rope half a dozen times, head held in a headlock, slammed dunked to the mat and still manages to get up and somehow keep going.

In other words, by now, you might have imagined that Paul was beginning to get the impression that talking about this man called Jesus, who died and rose again, was simply a one way ticket to trouble. Indeed, down the centuries, the Church has often discovered that this is the area of its proclamation of faith that has given it the most bother.

If Paul had simply watered it down a bit, turned his religious proclamation into some good advice or some reassuring thoughts, life might have been a bit easier for him. But no – Paul arrives in the city of Athens and, without as much as trying to find a proverbial Bed and Breakfast to stay in for the night, he goes straight to where all the action is – first of all to the synagogue and then into the very heart of Athens itself where the philosophers of the day passed the hours in debate.

The reason for Paul's determination to reach out to these people, we discover is found at verse 16 of our reading where we read the words, "*Paul was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols*". The Greek word for distressed here can be translated, apparently, by the words "*had a fit*" ... "*a seizure*"... even by the words "*irked*" or that most vivid of words that Paul definitely wouldn't have known, "*scunnered*" ...

Now, I've never been to Greece before. I would like to go at some point, if only to see some of the sights and sounds that Paul must surely have seen on his travels. And the thing is, I would probably want to go and see some of the ancient temples and the statues that were dotted around some of the great historical sights. And, to be honest, I don't think it would bother me that much to see them because the modern traveller doesn't look at these sorts of things as a threat to their religion, if only because belief in these idols and statues is a thing of the past.

But, 2000 years ago, when Paul walked through that city it was clear that belief in what these statues stood for was far from a thing of the past but rather an all too present contemporary reality.

These folks really believed in what these statues were about. This was their religion. This was their belief every bit as much as Jesus, the resurrected Saviour of the World, is at the heart of our belief.

Paul feels as if he has no option but to say something. His approach here, though, is quite different from the way that he often approached other places he has visited, which is what makes this such a fascinating passage to read.

So how does Paul speak to these people?

Well, the first thing that is noticeable here is the respect with which Paul addresses them. In fact, Paul goes as far as to say that he recognises, at verse 22 of our reading, that they are indeed a very "*religious*" people and I think Paul really means it. He recognises the sincerity of their faith.

There is a lesson there for the way that we too understand the faith of other people and especially of other faith groups. Paul has often been criticised over the years by certain commentators for seeming to demean and dismiss other faith perspectives than the one he wants to share. Here, however, Paul – if not embracing their beliefs – at least embraces their sincerity.

In the mid 1980's, the story goes, a Swedish Lutheran Bishop, was at a press conference where he was asked what he felt about another religious group opening up an alternative place of worship in Stockholm. The Bishop's name was Krister Stendhal who responded, not with the expected words of concern that a strange group from out of town were just about to set up near to one of his Cathedrals, but rather with what have become known as "*Stendahl's three rules of religious understanding*".

Here's what he said about trying to understand how people of other faith groups see their faith. Three rules, as follows:

The first - when you are trying to understand another religion, you should speak to those who follow that religion and not its enemies. Get to know what's inside their hearts and heads.

The second rule - Don't compare your best to their worst! We can all nit pick at what others say and be amazingly slow to see the weakness of our own dearly held ways of doing things.

The third rule is the most interesting of all - Leave room, said Stendhal, for what he called "*Holy Envy*". Holy Envy? What on earth is that? What Stendhal was probably meaning was that the more we talk to others of differing views the more we might actually find ourselves uttering those words of admission – "*I may not agree with them in what they say but there is something about the way that they work and some of the things they do that I have something to learn from...*" a touch, we might say, of Holy envy.... A dawning realisation that we have lessons that could be learnt from the most unexpected of places.

Now, all of this doesn't take away from the fact that Paul is trying to bring these people something of the Christian faith. At the same time by acknowledging that they were at least sincere in what they believed, he didn't create an immediate barrier with them.

It's this more cautious approach, even when he has been so irked and annoyed by what he sees around him – this plethora of statues – that keeps them listening to him.

It is also what leads to them eventually to say to him, at verse 19, "*May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears...*"

This week I discovered, in a completely different context, what this request of the Athenians to Paul really means. At the start of lockdown, you see, I bought a new TV - one of those smart TV's that connects to the Internet and plays YouTube and Netflix. Well, this week my TV set told me to upgrade the software that runs it with the threat that if I didn't that it may very well stop working! So, I did as I was told. I pushed the onscreen button to upgrade the software and my TV set stopped working anyway! Nothing would work.

I therefore decided to check out the manufacturer's website. I looked for the support section and on how to contact them. There I saw a little online chat function which I clicked, and I started typing messages to someone in cyber space who then started typing messages back to me. The first message was the usual one – "*have you tried switching the TV on and off again?*" Only about 50 times I replied! Eventually, after 20 minutes of going back and forth he said that he would email me some instructions about what to do. About an hour later the instructions arrived – three pages of them full of web links and techie language! So, I did what any sensible Dad would do – I emailed them onto to my youngest daughter who then set about fixing the TV set for me!

For once I could have said to the Tech support guy, who was awfully nice by the way, "*what is this strange new teaching that you are bringing me?*" And yet, all I needed was someone

with a little patience to take me through the process. I would get there eventually, with a little help – if not from my friends at least from my daughter!

OK – so not everyone believed that day in Athens. Could Paul have expected anything else? But, at least the folk listened and did so because this was the day that Paul joined their conversation and heard their story and, when he started telling his own story, he kept the message at a level they could cope with and understand – a sheer masterclass on how to share the gospel!

**Let us pray.**

### **Closing Prayer**

Loving God, we rejoice again in the belief that you are with us and that you can be known in the unexpected places, that we can perceive you in amongst the endless variety of life – in the market place as well as the grandest of cathedrals.

Come to us now, therefore, as we bring our prayers to you as we think of the needs of the world.

Help us, we pray, to follow Paul's example in Athens to be able to listen without judgement, to take a step inside the shoes that others wear and to begin to try and understand what motivates them.

In a world where the greatest need is often for understanding we pray that you would help people of differing views to listen to each other with respect, not giving up the things which are important to us but at the same time learning to appreciate that there are lessons to be learnt from places and views that we did not expect.

We also pray simplicity in our world – a simplicity that promotes understanding and which helps us to share the gospel with a clarity that does not condemn but which unites people in understanding.

May that understanding and simplicity be with those who need you this day – those at a low ebb in their life, those in need of encouragement and comfort at this time.

Bless us and all your people with your presence and your understanding for this we ask in Jesus name, Amen.

### **Benediction**

*Go now to love and serve the Lord and may the blessing of almighty God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – be with you and all whom you love this day and forevermore, Amen.*