**Cranmer Group Sermon, Worship & Prayers**

**May 17th - The 5th Sunday after Easter**

**‘Where’s God?’ (Acts 17:22-31)**

*Dear Friends,*

*Welcome to another Cranmer Group Virtual Service, this time hosted from in the Benefice – we’re finally in Aslockton Vicarage!*

*I’m delighted to welcome one of our congregations, our Reader, Annie Dickinson, as our preacher this week - Annie shares with us her reflections on St. Paul’s words on the Aeropagus to the people of Athens, from Acts chapter 17. It’s great to hear her thoughts!*

*From this week, we’re following our virtual services on Sunday mornings with an opportunity to get together for a chat. Each Sunday, the service will be available online from 9.30AM. It’ll last about 30 minutes, and then, at 10.15AM, we’re able to join together in a video conference, using a service called Zoom. However, for those of you who may not have access to the internet, you can still join our chat on Zoom, by phone. You’ll need to call 0131 460 1196. Then key into your phone the meeting ID (this week, Sunday May 17th, it’s 864 0083 1074, followed by #) and finally the password (this week, it’s 549794, followed by #). I hope you can join us!*

*With love and prayers, and God bless.*



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Alleluia! Christ Is Risen! **He Is Risen indeed!
Alleluia!**

**The Collect for the 5th Sunday after Easter
(Common Worship)**

Risen Christ,
by the lakeside you renewed your call to your disciples:
help your Church to obey your command
and draw the nations to the fire of your love,
to the glory of God the Father.
**Amen.**

**Filled With Compassion**

**Played by Deb Hubbard**

Filled with compassion for all creation
Jesus came into a world that was lost
There was but one way that He could save us
Only through suffering death on a cross *God You are waiting
Your heart is breaking
For all the people who live on the earth
Stir us to action
Filled with Your passion
For all the people who live on the earth*

Great is Your passion for all the people
Living and dying without knowing You
Having no Saviour they're lost forever
If we don't speak out and lead them to You

*Chorus*

From every nation we shall be gatheredMillions redeemed shall be Jesus' rewardThen He will turn and say to His FatherTruly my suffering was worth it all

*Chorus*

**Bible Reading: Acts 17:22-31 (New International Version)**

**Read by Steve Hadfield**

***In Athens***

*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.’*

**Sermon: ‘Where’s God?’ – Annie Dickinson**
Good Morning. I want to look at the reading that Steve has done for us.

Paul is in Athens and is being quizzed by the local intellectuals and philosophers, the Epicureans and Stoics. They’ve taken him to a rocky outcrop, the Aeropagus, where the Athenians hold a type of, often religious, court.

Athens is a city teeming with gods – Zeus, Aphrodite, Apollo, Hermes… on and on; indeed the Athenians ensure they have a god to cover every eventuality! Paul uses their love of gods, not by dismissing their beliefs, but as an entry to achieve his own end purpose, which is to proclaim a strong message about the One True God and the significance that Jesus’ resurrection from death holds for all of us. And it’s in this context that Paul speaks. And he is, for a change, both clear and succinct!

If you read this passage again, I wonder if you notice a touch of irony in Paul’s words. He wanders through their city, noticing it full of temples and statues to the gods, and when the local philosophers challenge him to explain himself, this is how he begins. “Men of Athens, I can see that in all things you’re very superstitious; I *even* found a statue to the Unknown God!” Here Paul uses a word sometimes translated “you’re very ‘religious’”, but the Greek suggests that it’s more accurately translated as you’re extremely ‘superstitious or pious’ – you worship so many gods.

In effect Paul is suggesting that they’re ‘covering all their bases’ or ‘hedging all their bets. In plain speak, he’s suggesting that they’re so concerned to ensure that all goes well for them (that they stay happy, healthy, wealthy, safe and content) that they are missing the One who truly matters, the Unknown God, whom Paul knows intimately and intends to reveal to them. He is the only true source of their health and wellbeing, and they don’t even realise it.

Paul is addressing two groups, the Stoics and the Epicureans. Now the Stoics believed in the importance of knowing our self, and knowing ourselves as a manifestation of a universal spirit; our aim is to find happiness or bliss and to recognise that we are all manifestations of that same spirit. I wonder if you’ve heard this view in the world today?

The Epicureans, on the other hand, are more like our agnostics, if god exists he’s far away and of no relevance; we should focus on getting on with life!

Now Paul is challenging both these viewpoints as inadequate. And perhaps we also live in such a time as this, with innumerable gods, but perhaps ours include science – with a power to answer all our questions all the unknowns; medical science – the power to ensure we stay healthy; gyms and sports centres – the power to keep us fit; entertainment – to keep us amused; money – to keep us safe and happy; and I’m sure you can think of many more.

Even our spiritual beliefs are diverse and a matter for personal preference. But Paul is challenging this too. So for us today, for you and for me, perhaps this is our first question to ponder over the coming week:

What are those things in which I place my faith, my trust? And where do I place God in that list?

Paul says ‘I have the answer you seek; I know the Unknown God and I can reveal Him to you. He’s everywhere, He created all things – all that you can see, and all that you can’t. And He’s a parent to all peoples – we are all His children (or ‘offspring’); and it’s He who determines which of His children live where and when.
Why? Well Paul tells us: simply so that, in due time, they will look for Him, for God, their father, their parent (verse 27).

Paul tells us God’s very purpose for us during our lives – that we might not look for Him with just our intellect but, the word Paul uses is, that we might ‘grope’ for Him; the word suggesting a sense of groping to find Him and touch Him in the darkness.

I wonder if this reminds you of the woman who has been bleeding for twelve years In Matthew Chapter 9 verse 20, who sought to grope, to clutch, at even just the tassel on the hem of Jesus’ garment. And what was Jesus’ response? “Be of good cheer, daughter, your faith (your trust) has made you well.”

So Paul leaves us with another question to ponder:

Am I groping to find and touch God in the darkness? What am I doing to actively seek to find God?

Finally Paul ends by hinting at why this is important for us: verses 30 to 32. He says there is no longer an excuse for us; for God’s offspring. God has sent a clear message to humans everywhere to ‘repent’.

‘Repent’ is a tricksy word. We tend to think of it solely in terms of breast-beating and anguish at our unworthiness, but it really doesn’t mean that; it means, to use Paul’s word, God has sent a message to humanity to ‘think differently’ or ‘turn and change your minds’.

Paul also gives the reason why this is now important, and it’s a really tough truth. In these times, he says, God has sent us this message, and He’s sealed it for us, as proof, by raising Jesus from death to a new kind of life – a resurrected life, because a day is coming when it is this Jesus who will judge the whole world.

BUT we need to be clear. Jesus will judge, as Paul states, ‘in righteousness’, and in the context of his own sacrifice for the sins of humanity. What wins for all of us, above all things, is love; Jesus loves mankind that is above all and beyond all. But that’s a sermon for another time!

For us today it’s enough for us to consider the challenge that Paul has laid before us; that in Jesus’ resurrection everything has changed, and now God finds no excuse for humans to stay ignorant of who He is, and who we are – verse 31. And it’s really important.

Paul is leaving us then with an invitation to ponder.

Firstly, what are the things in which I place my faith, my trust? And where does God come in my list?

Secondly, as one of God’s offspring holding His imprint in my DNA, how am I searching to know Him better? What do I do next?

Well, a good place for all of us to begin is, perhaps, in Tim’s invitations to join him in the coming week in the Thy Kingdom Come initiative on how we pray, and in the ‘You’ll Get Through This’ study sessions that he’s starting. So keep a watch out for these.

And always remember this is ‘good’ news. It’s not there to scare us or convict us, it’s there as an open invitation. To paraphrase Jesus in Matthew chapter 7 verse 7:

‘Come! Seek earnestly and you will find all you need… and more!’

Amen.

**Intercessions**

**Led by Patrick Newton**
Let us pray - Dear Lord

We come before you today to pray in this challenging time of coronavirus, when we feel anxious, scared and uncertain. We thank you Lord for being there for us as our comforter and reassurance. We know that you are a mighty God but also one who cares deeply about each one of us. Help us to truly put our faith in you, not just in a nodding way, but with genuine trust. You are our refuge and our strength, as you have been to Christians over so many generations.

Thank you that we can rely on you. Thank you for keeping us safe, and protecting our family and friends. We praise you for your creation which gives us so much pleasure this spring, for the sunshine, for the flowers and plants, for the animals, for life springing into action all around us at this time, and inspiring us with hope.

We thank you for the love and caring that this crisis has engendered within our country and communities, giving support and showing neighbourly love. We pray that our Government shows wisdom and discernment in handling the crisis. We think of the care workers and their sacrifice and integrity in caring for their patients.

We pray for those who have lost their lives with this virus, and for their loved ones who suffer the loss. Be with them and comfort them Lord. We pray for those who are lonely at this time. Life can be so tough and scary when you are self-isolating. We also think of those who have lost their job or business or are hungry. May you be their strength, Lord. We think of those who are currently suffering from ill-health. Let us take a moment now to think of those we know who need our prayer………….

Lord we pray for our church in England, may it grow and prosper at this time, demonstrating the love and caring you expect from your people. We thank you so much for sending us Tim to guide and encourage our Cranmer Benefice. May he and Clare settle into their new home and feel welcomed and blessed to find this group of Parishes, and may we find ways of helping them settle in. I pray that the members of our Cranmer Group may be a witness within our communities showing that we care, not just about the church structure, but more importantly we care about being Christlike.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayers

Merciful Father,
**accept these prayers
for the sake of Your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ
Amen.
The Lord’s Prayer**As our Saviour taught us, so we pray:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**

**The Collect for the 5th Sunday after Easter
(Book of Common Prayer)**

O Lord, from whom all good things do come: Grant to us thy humble servants, that by thy holy inspiration we may think those things that be good, and by thy merciful guiding may perform the same; through our Lord Jesus Christ.
**Amen**

 **Thou Whose Almighty Word
Played by Deborah Davies**

Thou, whose almighty word
chaos and darkness heard,
and took their flight;
hear us, we humbly pray,
and, where the Gospel day
sheds not its glorious ray,
let there be light!

Thou who didst come to bring
on thy redeeming wing
healing and sight,
heal to the sick in mind,
sight to the inly blind,
now to all humankind,
let there be light!

Spirit of truth and love,
life-giving holy Dove,
speed forth thy flight!
Move o’er the waters' face
bearing the lamp of grace,
and, in earth's darkest place,
let there be light!

Blessèd and holy Three,
glorious Trinity,
Wisdom, Love, Might;
boundless as ocean's tide,
rolling in fullest pride,
through the world far and wide,
let there be light!

I’m again suggesting you might like to try out a slightly more contemporary worship song. This week, it’s ‘Your Kingdom Come’, by Pete James, which was specially composed for the Thy Kingdom Come global prayer initiative in 2018. It has a beautiful piano accompaniment, and the video has some wonderful images of a candlelit St. Paul’s Cathedral!

You can listen to it (with the lyrics in the film itself) at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mA2q295l9A0>

I hope you enjoy it!

**A Closing Blessing**

The Spirit of truth lead you into all truth,
give you grace to confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
and strengthen you to proclaim the word
and works of God;
and the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be among you & remain with you always.
**Amen.**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
**In the name of Christ, Amen.**