

**Sermon: 2020/05/17 (Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year A) - Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66:1-5,15-16; 1 Peter 2:2-10; & John 14:1-14\_BTR**

In Lewis Carroll's follow-up (novel) to *Alice in Wonderland*, the young, plucky protagonist - a girl called, "Alice" - hence the title - climbs up on to the mantle; the surround over the fireplace in her living-room, and finds that the large, ornate mirror hanging there - this was before flat-screen "plasmas," you see - is a passageway; a portal to another, *very different* world:

I quote - "'Oh, Kitty!'" she said wistfully to the kitten she was idling with, "'how nice it would be if we could only get through into Looking-glass House!

[That's what she calls the reflection she could see in the mirror.]

I'm sure it's got, oh, such beautiful things in it.

Let's pretend there's a way of getting through into it, somehow, Kitty.

Let's pretend the glass has got all soft like gauze, so that we can get through.

Why, it's turning into a sort of mist, I declare!

It'll be easy enough to get through — "

She was up on the chimney-piece while she said this, though she hardly knew how she had got there. And certainly the glass was beginning to melt away, just like a bright, silvery mist.

[And, i]n another moment[,] Alice was through the glass, and had jumped lightly down into the Looking-glass room.' [n.1] [Pause.]

The strange place where she finds herself is, in many respects, the reverse of real-life.

That is to say, the "reverse" of *normal* life.

The "reverse" of life as we - and as she - expect it to be.

And, for this reason, she finds it to be both a fascinating place - exotic, *and also* disturbing; *dark*, sinister.

What she thought was "common sense" thinking, and established opinion don't get her very far in the land-beyond-the-mirror; in "Looking-Glass House."

Again and again, she observes that the residents there believe and act in ways that she thinks ridiculous and mad.

And so too must have been the Apostle Paul's experience and opinion of those he encountered in Athens, which we hear about today from (the Book of) *Acts*, chapter (seventeen).

This city - the ancient, bustling "heart" of the Greek realm - this gleaming, marble metropolis of philosophers and playwrights - the birthplace of democracy - was as far removed in terms of culture, religion and morality from his home in Syria-Palestine as the land-beyond-the-mirror/Looking-Glass House was from Alice's

England.

It was - Athens, subjectively speaking, *truly* "alien."

And, as such, *dangerous*, even:

Here, Paul was "out of his depth;" in *drastically* unfamiliar territory.

Here, what *he* thought was right seemed to the locals to be wrong; and what he thought was wrong seemed to them to be right.

About family.

About faith.

About sex, money, war...*everything*, really.

Now, *unlike* Alice, Paul wasn't, of course, transported there instantaneously; in a single moment:

He had journeyed there "by fits-and-starts" via Asia Minor and Macedonia - regions where the Greeks mixed and mingled alongside tribes and nations that were more similar to the Jews.

But as he journeyed westward, this complicated, rich mixture of languages, ethnicities and mentalities became less and less diverse.

And Athens was as thoroughly Greek and un-Semitic a place as existed anywhere. This would have been disconcerting; *unnerving* for him, a former pharisee and a Hebrew.

Exactly as we are disconcerted and unnerved, perhaps, by the situation the Church is currently up against.

Yes: 'Covid-19 is the Church's looking-glass of our generation, and we can't go back.' [n.2]

This is a "sink or swim" crisis for us:

we either adapt, or we decline and wither.

Now, by "adapt" I'm *not* meaning our message, mind - the message of calling 'all people everywhere to repent' [Acts 17:30], which is timeless; which is entrusted to us by God *Himself* through His Son.

As such, *that* "message" isn't ours to change;

it doesn't belong to us.

This need to "adapt" I speak of, is, then, about *methodology* or, if you prefer, "strategy."

That is to say, how do we - both personally and institutionally - take our divine calling of being God's ambassadors as Paul was, and make it more *effective* for this time and place?

*That's* the issue:

for as Peter spoke to us this morning, saying: 'Always be ready': [1 Peter 3:15].

So, to be specific, how can we bring the Gospel to people in this virus-infested, "looking-glass," topsy-turvy, "alien" country that *America* has become?

A "virus-infested, looking-glass, topsy-turvy, alien country" where what the Bible teaches as wrong is, seemingly - so often - seen as right, and where what *it* says

is true is seen, by a great many, as false?  
*That's* a daunting thing to think about isn't it?

So, let's look closely at Paul.

At his example.

What does *he* do?

Well, notice first of all how he doesn't just "launch in" with a condemnatory lecture, telling everyone (passing-by) how confused and misguided and wicked they are!

Not at all.

Nothing of the kind.

No conclusions are "jumped to."

No (hasty) presumptions does he make.

Rather, before his big, public speech in the Areopagus - that's the "town-square" in Athens, Paul alludes to a preceding period of time where he '*carefully*' appraised the situation in the city.

That's his own word.

He '*carefully*' examined Athenian society - its quality and character, and, after some meditation, determined how it was broken without the (Christian) Gospel (he carried).

He noticed its flaws and injustices for which Christ and Christ's enemy-love example is the remedy.

In particular, He noticed how Greek society "revolved" - *supposedly* - around a whole pantheon of powerful, protective deities - "deities" like Zeus, Apollo, Aphrodite, and others - in who - *supposedly* - the Greeks trusted - yet there was, in a corner, this 'altar...[t]o an unknown [unnamed] god', which suggested that the Greeks weren't quite so confident and satisfied as they pretended.

No, what the 'altar...[t]o an unknown [unnamed] god' revealed was that they - the proud, advanced, affluent Greeks - hadn't, in fact, got it all "figured out."

They were in so many ways prosperous and successful - much, *much* more so than where Paul was from; but despite these apparent advantages there was this "hole;" this...doubt lurking underneath the smug, know-it-all facade, which manifested itself in a shrine to whomever else "up there" might be listening.

And isn't that interesting?

*Illuminating.*

That 'altar' exposed a fundamental misgiving;

a "fundamental" insecurity;

a ...fear that, otherwise, the Greeks would have denied.

The existence of the "altar" exposed that the Greeks knew that something serious was amiss; that something was not. Quite. Right.

And this Paul exploits.

It was a *shrewd* thing to do.

And we Christians neglect that that - being "shrewd" - is a virtue the Savior Himself extolled:

'[B]e wise as serpents and innocent as doves.' He taught: [Mt. 10:16].

And so Paul was.

He confronts the Athenians with evidence of their inadequacy that *they themselves had supplied*, if only unwittingly, by way of that 'altar'; to confront them with *their* need for the Lord's truth and love.

And so by doing set a precedent for us to do the same.

For you and me in our private lives, and for St. Matthew's corporately - a precedent to...re-position, re-orient ourselves; permission to pause and be attentive;

to find new "footing" to hear how the world around us is, even now, "letting slip" about how it is wounded and afraid and doesn't have the answers - *the balm* - that the human soul seeks.

"What, then, *are* today's altars to unknown gods?" I ask.

Is it obsession with politics and politicians?

With Trump and the election?

With Greta and climate change?

With celebrities?

And how do these "altars" cry out for intervention by the Holy Spirit promised and supplied by Jesus through you and me?

Let's take a moment to reflect.

Footnotes:

1. Carol, Lewis; Tenniel, John & South, Anna (2009), *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There (MacMillan Collector's Library)*, London: MacMillan, 140-141.
2. See: Bright, Chris (23rd of April, 2020), 'Why Our Churches can't go Back to Normal', *Premier Magazine*, available at [https://www.premierchristianity.com/Blog/Why-our-churches-can-t-go-back-to-normal?utm\\_source=Premier%20Christian%20Media&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=1150010](https://www.premierchristianity.com/Blog/Why-our-churches-can-t-go-back-to-normal?utm_source=Premier%20Christian%20Media&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=1150010), (accessed May 12, 2020).