

Clear communication

25 5 14

God our redeemer,
you have delivered us from the power of darkness
and brought us into the kingdom of your Son:
grant, that as by his death he has recalled us to life,
so by his continual presence in us he may raise us
to eternal joy.

Today's text is from Acts chapter 17 and verse 23:

'an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown God"'.

I didn't. Did you? I didn't watch the latest BBC adaptation of the Daphne Du Maurier's novel, 'Jamaica Inn'. But I did hear a clip on Radio 4 and see a clip on BBC News in which one of the Cornish characters darkly says something to the female sitting opposite him. What he says was completely incomprehensible. Now my great grandfather was Cornish – out of Roche – and Cornwall has just been recognised officially in the UK as a distinct region, a people with their own distinct language. But what the man mumbled wasn't Cornish or distinct, it was simply sotto voce, totally incomprehensible, not only to my failing hearing but to the majority of viewers and listeners who'd complained.

Which brings me to today's text and the point of today's sermon: **'an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown God"'**. Paul is in Athens. He has been speaking

about the Christian take on Judaism, about the good news that Jesus Christ is the Son of God our Saviour. And he has been heard by and caught the interest of some Athenians, amateur philosophers, fascinated by the study of philosophical ideas, not least the understanding of what it is for God to be God. So they invite Paul to speak to them at the Areopagus and our text forms part of his opening gambit, aimed at capturing their attention by starting where they are, starting from their experience. And he does so by the simple trick of drawing their attention to what he's seen in their city – an altar to an unknown God. Don't you love it? In a polytheism, the danger is you may have missed out on worshipping an important deity and this altar is a sort of catch-all, just in case. And Paul starts off by saying he's here to inform them about what they in ignorance already worship: Jesus Christ, the unknown God!

And that's my point. If you want to communicate, you need to do so in a way that your audience can hear. For Paul, it was a question of being **all things to all men** (1 Corinthians 9 v22). To a Jewish congregation in a synagogue, he was a circumcised Jew. To Greek speakers, he spoke Greek. To the Roman authorities, he was a Roman citizen. He spoke Aramaic and demotic Greek. He was a man of his time, for his time, for all times through his writings.

For God to communicate to us, it needs to be in a way we can understand. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew and Jews on the whole have or acquire some knowledge of the language of their scripture. The New Testament was written in Greek, the language spoken commonly in the Roman Empire throughout the region where the gospel was first preached. The Bible was translated into Latin,

the language of scholars and priests and as such was the norm for the Church in the west. And with the Reformation came the idea of translating the Bible into the language of the people, whatever that language might be, and so, as English speakers, we have not least the King James Bible as the fruit of the Reform.

I believe God speaks to us not only through sacred writing but through our everyday experience. Dawn over Dinard; sunrise over St Malo; sunset over St Enogat; the ebb and flow of the tide. He speaks to us in our daily encounters with people: a kind word or deed in the bakers; a smile from the postman; an unexpected telephone call. One of the names of the God we worship is Emmanuel – God with us, alongside us, up close to us – his Holy Spirit.

And if God is speaking to us, then let me simply ask: ‘Are we hearing him ? Are we listening to him ? Are we paying attention ?’ And if we are, then my challenge must be are we making the fact of God in our lives clear to other people by what we say and by what we do ?

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

25th May, 2014

G: Sermons 29 : Clear communication

