

## **Reflection for Easter 6 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last**

Communication and how we communicate is critical in so many areas of life, in all relationships, personal, social, and work orientated. It is also critical in how we share the Christian message. It is not just what we say but how we say it.

Shortly after I was first ordained, and with my pre-ordination background in BT's technical training department, I was asked to be part of working group looking to improve the telecommunication infrastructure round the cathedral close at Lichfield. One day there was a meeting taking place with a couple of BT's sales staff. I went along in clerical collar and suit and sat on the edge of the meeting. What became clear very quickly was that the BT sales staff were not looking to sell what the Close needed but what they were tasked to sell that week. At this point I made an interjection and asked a couple of questions using BT in house technical language. The two salespersons looked at each other as if to say how does a clergyperson know our in-house terminology?! From that point on, the whole tone of the meeting changed: they knew I was speaking their language.

As St Paul walks through Athens and looks around he needs to ask questions about how he can witness and share the gospel message in a city full of pagan temples and altars. If he uses language that Jewish audiences understand and relate to it would make little if no impression in this very different culture. He needs to find a way to communicate that relates to the his way audience thinks and taps into their culture.

It's a question that the church and individual Christians have to struggle with time and again. How do we communicate our faith to those around us in a language and a way they will understand, relate to and respond to? It's no good expecting them to understand our in-house terminology, we have to be proactive looking for fresh ways in.

So how does Paul tackle just that question?

The Apostle has arrived in Athens, not through choice, but as away of escaping persecution in Macedonia: it was not originally part of itinerary. Yet he finds himself there waiting for his two friends Silas and Timothy. So what does Paul do? He does not just jump in; rather he takes time to do a bit of sightseeing, like all good tourists (*as my wife might say, he looks at the "piles of stones"*). But as he walks around, the number of idols strikes him: the city is full of them and, to his Jewish Christian mind, this is shocking.

The question is what does he do? Does he ignore what he sees or does he begin to challenge and question the situation.

The first thing Paul does is talk to the local Jewish community, then he goes to the marketplace. It's as if he cannot keep quiet and, before long, he finds himself before the Areopagus (the city council), explaining his views.

Paul's approach highlights that we are called to witness for Christ whenever and wherever we are. In some ways it would have been easier for Paul to wait quietly and say nothing until Silas and Timothy arrived - but no - he stands up against what he sees as wrong and mis-guided.

Following the example of Paul does not mean that we will all have to stand up and make speeches. But it does mean that our Christian values and thinking should affect every part of our lives, even if the odds are stacked against us and even if speaking out may bring us into conflict from time to time.

Returning to Paul and the issue I started with. He is in a pagan city, where Greek culture and understanding hold sway - a culture that has little in common with the Jewish setting away from which Christianity was rapidly growing. For Paul to use Jewish language and ideas in his speech to the Areopagus would create an immediate barrier rather than open doors. He needs to use their language as a way in.

A sermon like that preached by Peter at Pentecost would have been inappropriate to his hearers in this very different world, focusing as it did on what the Jews leaders had done in putting Jesus to

death, and how God had raised him from the dead and exalted him as Lord -arguments backed up by references to both Old Testament prophecy and eyewitness accounts.

Paul now finds himself in a situation where all the background knowledge a Jewish hearer would know and relate to is missing. We are in a similar situation, witnessing in society that is moving ever further away from its Christian roots, where even a basic biblical knowledge and understanding can no longer be taken for granted.

Paul's response is not to start where he is, but where his hearers are: **"Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way."** What is Paul doing in his introduction is using flattery to build bridges between himself and his hearers. He is building a foundation on which he has the right to be heard - something he takes further as he uses the altar to the unknown God as his springing off point. Then, as he builds his argument further, Paul does not use Old Testament prophecy to back up his ideas but quotes from Greek poets. I suppose it's a bit like us quoting from modern literature or a popular TV programme.

Paul's approach here provides us with important insights into our witness for Christ. The idea of building bridges between ourselves and those we seeking to reach out to in both words and actions. It shows that the Church is not a closed club, an irrelevant side show, looking after its own interests but, rather, relevant to the world around it and with something valuable to offer.

Two questions, though, could be levelled at Paul. Firstly, has he compromised too far in building his bridge and, secondly, did it really work? In coming close to his hearers Paul is only prepared to go so far. He may not mention Jesus by name but what he is saying is clear.

**"While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."**

For Paul's hearers this is the point where he loses credibility. In Greek thinking the soul was immortal but the idea of a bodily resurrection was alien. For Paul, though, he has reached the point of no compromise. His message, as ours should be, is rooted in Jesus and the resurrection and this was the point he was leading towards. The lesson here is that, as much as we may build bridges towards those around us, it must not be at the expense of what is fundamental to our faith.

In making that stand, it could be argued Paul failed.

**When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, "We will hear you again about this."**

Yet, if we read on it says some joined him.

Failure - yes, if he was looking for mass conversions, but if only a few find Christ is that not, in itself, success?

We are all called to witness for Christ, to be lights in the world around us.

Witnessing for Christ should involve being challenged to ask the question: how do I relate to this person? how can we build bridges across which the gospel will travel? Building bridges takes time - time during which we may think we are getting nowhere. What we are not called to do is sit back and do nothing.

We, like Paul, guided by the Holy Spirit are called to engage with those around us and share the love of God.