

Paul at the Areopagus



Acts 17:22 "Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you."

Last Sunday, we heard the story of St. Stephen preaching at the synagogue of the Freedmen in Jerusalem and so stirring up the crowd there that they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him before the Jewish council, whereupon he was dragged out of the city and stoned to death for blasphemy, becoming the church's first martyr. Nonetheless, followers of Jesus appear to continue going to synagogues on the Sabbath and speaking out about Jesus there, and also in the marketplaces, and again and again there was trouble. Something similar with Paul is happening here in today's reading, though it might not be so obvious.

Prior to arriving in Athens, Paul had been teaching in the synagogue at Thessalonica. Some of the crowd there were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and a few of the leading women, we are told. But then some others of the Jews became jealous and with the help of some ruffians in the marketplace, they formed a mob and set the city in an uproar (Acts 17.5). While the mob was searching for Paul and Silas to bring them out to the assembly, they attacked Jason's house where they thought he was staying, and they dragged Jason and some other disciples before the city authorities, shouting, "These people who have been turning the world upside down, have come here also."

That very night the disciples in Thessalonica sent Paul and Silas off to Beroea. But when the Jews of Thessalonica learned

that Paul was there, they came there to stir up and incite the crowds (Acts 17.12). Then the disciples immediately sent Paul away back to the Greek coastland. Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, receiving instructions from him to have Silas and Timothy join him there as soon as possible.

In Acts we then read: "While Paul was waiting in Athens for Silas and Timothy to catch up with him, he saw that the city was full of idols, and as was his custom, he (also) argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the market place every day with those who chanced to be there. Some also of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers met him . . . and they took hold of him and brought him to the Areopagus" (Acts 17.16-). Now the Areopagus is not only the name of a piece of land jutting out from the western end of the Acropolis, but it also refers to an ancient oligarchical council which from very early times met on that hill and administered judgment in certain criminal cases, especially in regard to religious matters. Their stone seats whereupon they sat in judgment are still visible there today. Thus, it is not entirely clear therefore when Paul was 'taken hold of' and brought to the Areopagus to explain his new teaching, whether it was before the official courts or whether the place was merely chosen as a convenient spot for the meeting. But considering the trouble Paul had been getting into of late, I suspect that it was before civil authorities.

So, we read in today's story, Paul addressing the Areopagus, says "Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. 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. When they (at the Areopagus) heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed, but others said, 'We will hear you again about this (matter).'

At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them" (Acts 17,29-33). Now did the title of Dionysius as an "Areopagite" imply that he was a member of the oligarchical council?

Paul did not return to the Areopagus to be heard again, as directed. Instead, he left town immediately after this, without even waiting for Silas and Timothy to arrive. Was Paul skipping a court appearance here, so to speak? For Paul went on to Corinth and there Paul would argue in the synagogue every sabbath and would try to convince Jews and Greeks. When they opposed and reviled him, Paul in protest said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! From now on I will go to the gentiles." Then he left the synagogue and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus,

a worshiper of God; whose house happened to be next door to the synagogue, where Paul stayed for a year and a half. But the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the Gallio the proconsul, who dismissed the case as a matter of questions about words and names and Jewish law. Then the crowd angrily seized Sosthenes, an official of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal," but Gallio paid them no mind (Acts 18.17).

Paul eventually moved on to Ephesus and about that time, no little disturbance broke out (there) concerning the followers of Paul (Acts 19.23). A man named Demetrius, a silversmith who made silver shrines and brought much business to the artisans, whom he gathered together, said, "Men, you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost the whole of Asia this Paul has persuaded and drawn away a considerable number of people by saying that gods made with hands are not gods. And there is danger now to this trade of ours. When the artisans heard this, they were enraged and the city was filled with the confusion, and people rushed together to the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's travel companions. Paul wished to go into the crowd, but the disciples would not let him. After the uproar had ceased, Paul left for Jerusalem.

There, the Jews from Asia, who saw Paul in the temple in Jerusalem, stirred up the whole crowd (Acts 21.27). They seized him, and people rushed together, as they dragged him out of the

temple. While they were trying to kill (Paul), word came to the tribune of the temple police that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. Immediately soldiers and centurions ran down to them and when the crowd saw them coming, they stopped beating Paul. Then the tribune himself came, arrested Paul, and ordered him to be bound by two chains; he inquired who he was and what he had done. Some in the crowd shouted one thing, some another, and as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered Paul to be brought into the barracks (Acts 21.35). When Paul came to the steps of the barracks, the violence of the mob was so great that he had to be carried (in) by the soldiers. The crowd that followed kept shouting, "Away with him!" The next day Paul was brought before the whole Jewish council, where there was division about Paul's teaching on the resurrection. When the dissension (there) became violent, the tribune, fearing that they would tear Paul into pieces, ordered the soldiers to go down, take him by force, and bring him into the barracks again (Acts 23.6).

In the morning a group of forty Jews joined in a conspiracy to kill Paul. They went to the chief priests and elders and said, "We have strictly bound ourselves by an oath to taste no food until we have killed Paul. Now then, you and the council must notify the tribune to bring him (back) down to you, on the pretext that you want to make a more thorough examination of his case. And we are ready to do away with him before he arrives." But the son

of Paul's sister heard about the ambush, so he went and told Paul, and for his safety Paul was moved to the palace at Caesarea (Acts 23.12-23). Finally, the group appealed to Festus the Procurator there and requested that Paul be transferred back to Jerusalem. They were, in fact, planning another ambush to kill him along the way, so Paul, as a Roman citizen, appealed to the emperor himself. That appeal resulted in Paul being sent instead to Rome for judgment, where at the end of the Book of Acts, Paul was described as living by himself in Rome, under house arrest, with a soldier guarding him, while awaiting his trial (Acts 28.16). Sometime later, according to tradition, the Emperor Nero is said to have ruled against Paul, and he was beheaded.

So, the episode at the Areopagus is just one in a long string of violence that the preaching of Paul and Stephen and others caused. But why? What was so upsetting to the crowds? Was it simply a dispute about the claims of the resurrection, or Jesus being called the Messiah, or attacks on those Roman idols made with human hands? Was it just a matter of questions about words and names and Jewish law, as suggested by Gallio the Proconsul in Corinth? Surely it was not artisans at the Temple in Jerusalem making claims against Paul as Demetrius the silversmith did in Ephesus. Was it that Christianity was 'stealing' away devout Greeks and prominent women from the congregations of Jewish synagogues? Was it social unrest caused by a theology of radical

equality between Jew and Greek, male and female, and slave and master, so contrary to Jewish and Roman customs of that time?

And what was Paul's reaction to all of this violence? Was it radical nonviolence, like Jesus commended in turning the other cheek and loving our enemies, just as those early Christians did not support the various Jewish revolts against Rome? Early Christianity was, it seems clear, such a radical departure from the social and religious norms of the Roman and Jewish people that crowds resorted to violence against them, as they did again and again for the next 300 years! Amen.