

# SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER<sup>i</sup>

## The Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity

### Lessons:<sup>ii</sup>

**The First Lesson:** Here beginneth the fourth Verse of the third Chapter of the First Book of the Kings, commonly called the Third Book of the Kings.<sup>iii</sup>

“... And the king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there; for that was the great high place: a thousand burnt offerings did Solomon offer upon that altar.

“In Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night: and God said, Ask what I shall give thee. And Solomon said, Thou hast shewed [SHOWD] unto thy servant David my father great mercy, according as he walked before thee in truth, and in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart with thee; and thou hast kept for him this great kindness, that thou hast given him a son to sit on his throne, as it is this day. And now, O LORD my God, thou hast made thy servant king instead of David my father: and I am but a little child: I know not how to go out or come in. And thy servant is in the midst of thy people which thou hast chosen, a great people, that cannot be numbered nor counted for multitude. Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this thy so great a people? And the speech pleased the Lord, that Solomon had asked this thing. And God said unto him, Because thou hast asked this thing, and hast not asked for thyself long life; neither hast asked riches for thyself, nor hast asked the life of thine enemies; but hast asked for thyself understanding to discern judgment; Behold, I have done according to thy words: lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart; so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee. And I have also given thee that which thou hast not asked, both riches, and honour: so that there shall not be any among the kings like unto thee all thy days. And if thou wilt walk in my ways, to keep my statutes and my commandments, as thy father David did walk, then I will lengthen thy days. And Solomon awoke; and, behold, it was a dream. And he came to Jerusalem, and stood before the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and

offered up burnt offerings, and offered peace offerings, and made a feast to all his servants.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

**The Second Lesson:** Here beginneth the sixteenth Verse of the seventeenth Chapter of the Acts of the Apostles.<sup>iv</sup>

“Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry. Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him. Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babbler say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection. And they took him, and brought him unto Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is? For thou bringest certain strange things to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean. (For all the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing.) Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars’ hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you. God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; Neither is worshipped with men’s hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things; And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us: For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring. Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man’s device. And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will

judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.

“And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter. So Paul departed from among them. Howbeit certain men clave unto him, and believed: among the which was Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

### **Text:**

From the Second Lesson: “Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry.”<sup>v</sup> In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

### **Homily:**

Our Second Lesson, from the Book of Acts, fails to convey its full meaning to us today without some additional instruction. It seems to be a nice story of Paul’s interaction with the Athenians, and his preaching the Gospel to them. A good deal more, however, is implied which would have been understood all too well in Paul’s day.

Let’s reconstruct what happened.

In the synagogue in Athens, Paul had taught and debated with the Jews resident there. Presumably he made little headway, as he then seems to have taken to preaching the Gospel in the Agora, the marketplace of Athens.

Now, at this time, Athens was, along with Alexandria, one of the two most noted centers of learning in the world. Although Plato was some three centuries dead and gone, his Academy still functioned in Athens -- justly famed as “Academia”. Philosophers of many schools of thought were teaching in Athens; although each held his philosophical position to be better than any other, they were (as a rule) courteous to

each other, and respectful of the other's views and position. They competed for students; as there was no public education, each of these was, in some sense, his own university.

While basic education was taught (at least to the wealthy) by tutors in most cities, these were the ultimate scholars, who would not demean themselves by taking such a common (even if lucrative) position as tutoring, but rather sought students to come to them, and provide support for their education. Socrates, in his lifetime, had been one of their number, as were Plato and Aristotle after him. Aristotle had, of course, somewhat demeaned himself by becoming a tutor, but since his pupil was Alexander the Great, he was somewhat forgiven this.

Perhaps you remember Socrates' end: he was forced to drink hemlock poison for "irreligiosity" for impugning the Greek gods.

Now here comes Paul, teaching about this "new" God about whom the Greeks knew nothing. Had he confined himself to the synagogue, the philosophers and Athenian authorities probably wouldn't have taken notice of him, but his public preaching in the Agora crossed the line. Worse yet, he was talking about human resurrection, which the Greeks "knew" to be wrong (at least on the basis of their philosophies).

Paul was taken to the Aeropagus, where he was to be questioned by the philosophers. Now the Aeropagus was where the Athenian High Court of Justice met. If I recall correctly, convicted traitors were hurled from the rock ledge of the hill to their deaths. So Paul's discourse with the philosophers should most probably be viewed from our perspective as a trial -- one with capital punishment as a possible outcome.

But Paul knew that God had led him to this situation, and would stand by and take care of him in the trial. He had been commanded to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles, and here were Gentiles who were clearly heathen idol worshippers who needed to hear the Word.

In this (sometimes known as Paul's Athenian sermon), Paul did not water down the Gospel one iota. He did, however, turn the tables on his accusers (who are somewhat unclear in this description -- were they the

Athenian Jews or the philosophers?) by using their own works against them.

He refers them to their own altar dedicated to “The Unknown God”, which stood prominently in the Agora. He points out to them that they, themselves, have thereby established the worship of the one, true, and living God, even though they themselves did not know Him, nor understand His hand in creation.

The final outcome of this trial was positive. Paul was found, if not innocent, at least not guilty, and permitted to go his way. Although apparently not many were convicted in their hearts, we’re told one convert was “Dionysius the Aeropagite”. So here we have a man who’s named after one of the Greek gods, who is a member of the Council of the Aeropagus (think of it as the Supreme Court). Even if Paul’s converts were few in number, they were high in quality, and gave hope for the future. Not again would a Christian be brought before the Athenian High Court for his beliefs. And, eventually, the Christian Church became well-established in Athens.

If Paul wrote any Epistles to the Athenians, they have not survived. A shame, as it would have been most instructive for how we should deal with a skeptical academic crowd. We could certainly use such instruction today!

### **Conclusion:**

In closing, I’d like to make reference to our First Lesson. In it, King Solomon asks God for wisdom, and receives not merely wisdom, but many of the earthly goods one might desire. Let us, like Solomon, ask God for the wisdom to deal with the world, and to help us, like Paul, to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ!

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<sup>i</sup> “Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening.” Concerning the Service of the Church, *THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

<sup>ii</sup> *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943)*, *THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* xxxiii (PECUSA 1928, rev 1943).

<sup>iii</sup> *I Kings 3:4-15 (KJV)*.

<sup>iv</sup> *Acts 17:16-end (KJV)*.

<sup>v</sup> *Acts 17:16 (KJV)*.

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