**Acts 17:16-32**

**Principles for Mission**

At St. Andrew’s, we are a Mission-Shaped Church, which means that we have a strong sense that everything we do should be guided by the principles of sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ with our local community and beyond.

And sometimes, we do that through our actions: through supporting the North Enfield Foodbank collections, through the pastoral support we offer to people in times of need, through our work with children and young people and so on. But sometimes, we do that through our words as well: by actually telling people who Jesus is, what the Christian faith is all about and what difference God has made in our lives.

Let me start by asking you: when was the last time you shared the Christian faith with someone - not in actions, but in words? When did you last tell someone about God’s love? When did you last tell someone what difference being a Christian has made in your life? Because all of us have a story to tell and experiences to share and telling others about the love of God is part of what it means to follow Jesus.

And sometimes it can seem like a scary idea, can’t it, to tell other people about Jesus? Because we may think that we don’t know our Bible well enough or we are not well versed enough in theology or we might get asked a question to which we don’t know the answer.

But in reality, most people aren’t interested in deep theological debate or the answer to difficult questions. Most people are just interested in why you come to church and what difference that makes to you. Most people are interested in why you are a follower of Jesus and what difference that makes in your life. And we can all answer those questions, if we give them a bit of thought.

Sharing your faith is actually really easy. And actually, I believe that it is far easier to share our faith now than it has been at any time for the last few hundred years, for two reasons:

Firstly, most people in the UK are so unchurched, so far removed from the church that if you talk to them about the church, they are genuinely inquisitive and interested. We are now into a third generation of people who have not come to church and most people have no idea what we do or why - so there is a genuine interest when we talk about it.

And secondly, more than for a very long time, there is a genuine hunger for spirituality in our nation and a real desire to understand faiths. This has come about for two reasons: The desire to understand different faiths is partly because religion is on the front page of our newspapers most days, for good reasons and for bad reasons. Even today, in the aftermath of the horrific attacks on the mosques in New Zealand, there are Imams and religious commentators reflecting on the atrocity and what it means in a democratic society.

But also, there is a genuine hunger for spirituality in our nation because so many people are so busy and so stressed that they are actively looking for spiritual input that will make a real difference in their lives. Mindfulness apps are some of the most used on mobile phones. Prayer retreats and meditation retreats are on the increase. Silence is a valuable commodity that people are hungering for. And so we have the opportunity to share our faith with people who are desperately looking for spirituality that has meaning; they are not interested in just ideas or doctrines or concepts so much as expressions of faith that make a real difference to daily living.

So I would encourage you all to seize the moments you have to tell others about your faith and the difference that God makes in your lives. People want to know…

And there is a real similarity between our situation and that which was encountered by Paul that we heard about in the first reading, from Acts 17 when he went to Athens. Because like our society today, Athens at that time was a melting pot of religious and spiritual ideas and practices. One historian has written that, at that time, ‘It was easier to find a god in Athens than a man”! And it’s true – there were temples and statues and religious idols on every street: the people of Athens worshiped all sorts of gods including Athena and Zeus, Ares, and Mars, the gods called Jupiter, Venus, Mercury, and the gods Neptune and Diana. Everywhere you went in Athens, there were people undertaking religious practices and hungering after spiritual experience.

And that’s the same for us here in Enfield, of course. In the last census information for this Parish alone, 61% of people registered as Christian but across a whole range of denominations, of course. And 7.5% registered as Muslim and 1% as Jewish and others registered as Buddhist and Hindu and Sikh and other religions too. The parish in which we worship today has a large number of different religious expressions and literally thousands of people hungering after spiritual experience. Just like when Paul was in Athens…

So how did Paul respond to these people of other faiths and those of no faith? And what approach are we to take today?

Well, here’s the first and most important principle: that Paul did not judge them and he was not rude or hostile or aggressive or confrontational. Instead, he approached those from other faiths with humility and respect. His opening words were this, in verse 22: “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way”. He showed them respect, and acknowledged their spirituality.

Now that may seem like an obvious thing to do but sadly, the history of the church does not always reflect that. Instead, Christians have often gone into situations with arrogance and disrespect, as if we have all the answers and all other faiths are just ignorant. The idea behind so much missionary endeavor and the behavior of so many Christians today is to not listen, but just talk, as if to say, “Jesus is the answer – now what is your question?”

That is so disrespectful, of course. If we want to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we need to engage with people as people, not just as potential converts. We need to engage with our community where it is at, not where we wish it would be.

Genuine Christian mission does not patronize people, but is more willing to listen and learn than it is to speak.

So from this passage, I just want to draw out three quick principles about mission and how we can learn from Paul’s approach here.

**1. Get to know our community**

And the first is this, that if we want to be successful in mission as a church, we need to understand the community in which we are located.

This passage from Acts 17 suggests that Paul spent a lot of time just wandering around the city, looking at what was going on in the streets, entering the synagogues and listening to the debates, checking out the street speakers and philosophers and preachers. And then, when he had got a feel for the community, he was able to preach the Gospel effectively.

Now many of you have lived in Enfield for many, many years and might argue that you know the town really well already. But I would gently ask whether you feel that you really know the town, or do you just know those aspects and people groups that you engage with?

That’s not a judgment, it’s just a fact: that we tend to mix with a particular group of people and we know that group really well and thereby think we know Enfield well but in reality, we just know our take on Enfield. Let me give you a few examples:

Did you know that there are 20,255 people living in the parish of St. Andrew’s across 8,300 households?

38% of those people are aged under 30 years old and only 15% are aged over 65 years old.

Did you know that official Child Poverty in our parish is 19%?

Did you know that Lone Parent households is at 25%?

And that we have 39% ethnic diversity?

Did you know that St. Andrew’s parish is in the top 38% of deprived parishes in the country and that 19% of our adults in the parish have no qualifications whatsoever?

Now these are important facts and figures for us as we seek to be a mission-shaped church that can really make an impact for the Gospel in our area.

Now, for me probably more than for you, it’s hard to really get to know Enfield, because most of my week is spent doing church things or talking to people about God and faith and so I tend to live in a bubble that doesn’t reflect the parish as a whole. And you probably have your own bubble too: perhaps the parents in the school playground or the elders that you meet at various social groups or whatever.

And so I have to be proactive in getting out of my bubble in order to actually listen to the community. So once a week, I go to McDonalds and I just sit and listen, and watch what goes on around me and the Enfield I see in there is so different from the Enfield in my own bubble. I also follow Community Forums on Facebook and Twitter to try to learn about what the real concerns are in this parish and not just what people tell me because I am the Vicar.

It’s hard work for all of us to really get to know our community but our success as a Mission-Shaped Church depends on it, of course.

So firstly, like Paul, we need to get to know our community so that when we tell people about Jesus, we are speaking into their real needs and not just answering the questions that we think they should be asking.

**2. We need to engage with ‘the spiritual’ and not just ‘the Christian’**

Now this is a difficult one because, let’s be honest, no-one likes confrontation. But this principle does require us to speak our truth into various situations.

Listen to how Paul begins speaking with the Athenians in this passage, from verse 22: “Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.”

Paul commended them for their spiritual search but wanted to take them further into understanding the truth about God, even when that conflicted with their current spiritual practice. He wasn’t prepared to just endorse what they were currently doing in order to keep the peace and avoid confrontation.

And sometimes, we need to say to people: “I admire your spiritual search, it is a great thing that you are seeking after truth – but let me tell you where that truth is to be found, and it’s not in the way you are currently living…”

It’s tough, because we don’t want to be seen as judgmental but we do have a Gospel to proclaim…

There are spiritual practices that just do not sit easily with the Christian faith and we need to engage with these and show a better way…Yes, we need to approach people with respect and understanding and humility, but we have to be faithful to our call and gently explain what the Christian faith is all about so that others can then make their own judgment about whether or not they too want to follow Jesus. We must speak the truth – but always with respect and kindness

So firstly, we need to get to know our community better.

Secondly, we need to engage with ‘the spiritual’ and not just ‘the Christian’.

And thirdly and finally, we need to understand that

**3. Mission is about going out, not expecting people to always come to us**

Think about the method of mission that Jesus employed. He never called a single disciple in the synagogue, did he? Instead, he called all of his disciples from the place where they were working or where they were having a party or where they lived. Jesus went out to them, into their everyday places and called them to faith there.

Paul was the same. He often started in the synagogue, just like Jesus, but then went out into the streets and the houses and proclaimed the Gospel there. And that’s what we see in this passage from Acts, of course: Paul out and about in the streets of Athens, talking about God. He went to where the people were gathering rather than waiting for them to come to him.

And if we want to grow stronger as a Mission-Shaped Church, we need to be ‘out there’ rather than expecting people to always come to us.

Some churches have so many activities, so many meetings, so many groups that members of the congregation are constantly in church or in church activities and hardly have any time to go ‘out there’ and be with others. I don’t think that’s how church should be. I think we should have an absolute minimum amount of meetings and an absolute minimum amount of activities and what we should be about is actually resourcing people; to take God ‘out there’ into their everyday lives rather than constantly trying to gather people together for another Committee Meeting or another Working Party or another Event.

Church, I think, should be like a petrol station where you fill up and then drive away each week to live your life in the power and energy of God.

So we can learn a lot from Paul’s experience in Athens as we seek to grow as a Mission Shaped Church and as we seek to live out our Mission Statement, which is on the inside of the pewsheet: “Building community on the values of Jesus”.

First, we must get to know our community better.

Second, we must engage with the spiritual and not just the Christian.

Third, we must get out there into the world and not just wait for people to join us.

In this way, we will be following the example of Jesus and following the example of Paul and we can really make a difference in the world, and in our community for God. Which, ultimately, is what we are all about as a church…