

Responding to the proclamation

Acts 17

Sermon given by Bob Mendelsohn

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Shalom friends at St Swithun's, and thank you, Roger, for letting me return to the church, this time on a Sunday morning to share the good news, the Gospel of Christ, with the family here. I understand you have been involved in a series of studies from the book of Acts and today we continue that series, with a sermon entitled "Responding to the Proclamation." So, this is a cue to those who wonder what will happen at the end of my talk. What will you do? I hope you will respond, even as I see in the story today, by those who heard the apostle Paul in his day. I'll tell you a bit about Jews for Jesus (www.jewsforjesus.org.au) for whom I'm also here today and give you a chance to respond to our faith mission, and we will encourage you to be proclaimers as well in these days on the North Shore and throughout the country.

Of course, some are given to sleep during Sunday morning sermons. They say, if you took all the men who fell asleep on Sunday morning and lay them end to end... they would be much more comfortable.

So let me give you an outline of our talk today, and then if you are given to sleep, at least you will be able to speak intelligently about the message during Morning Tea or brunch. We will talk about reaching out to Jews and initial Jewish response, three comments that Paul gave to the Mars Hill folks, if you will, Paul's sermon that morning, and finally three different Mars Hill responses, which lend themselves to each person's response to the same message this morning, 20 centuries on. OK, are you ready?

So, first we have Jewish reaction.

For this, let us back up a bit in our text to chapter 17, verse one and following. Paul was out travelling as he was given to do, and in verses 1 and 2, arrives in Thessalonica and begins to preach in the synagogues. And he spends several Saturdays sharing the Gospel of Y'shua, that Jesus is the Messiah and Saviour of the world. In fact, it was

three weeks in a row; Paul was preaching that Jesus is the Lord. And many Jewish people from the area were coming to believe what he said. The Bible says also “a great multitude” of the God-fearing Greeks and some substantial women. These would have been Jewish-oriented Gentiles, who were in attendance at the St Ives Synagogue of the day.

Paul’s message not only brought conversion, but hostility. Some Jewish people were not as keen as others to hear from Paul. Gathering some *agoraion*, that is, some local bartering sailors and drifters, near the docks of the port, they formed an angry mob (v. 5) and went wild, looking for Paul and others. Their hopes of finding Paul however failed, as they only found a believer named Jason and dragged him and some other new believers into the town hall council chambers. The angry folks shouted that Paul and others had turned the world upside down, which would not have been a statement of commendation. More testimony produced more false justice and our apostolic heroes were sent out of town on the first stagecoach, with a one-way ticket.

Let’s not let Thessalonica be our only example. Luke gives us another beginning in verse 10. Paul and Silas and no doubt Luke himself, travel to Berea, 100 kilometres away. There they find quite a different reaction to the message. Or maybe we should just see this in a slow-release timeline. The message of the resurrection of Jesus, the hope we can have as a result of the death of Y’shua and his conquest over it, all began to take root. Luke says the folks who listened were ‘fair-minded’ (or noble minded). This again took place in the synagogue. Paul later would write the Romans, “the gospel of Christ, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” (1.16) Seems Paul lived that out, even though he was Apostle to the Gentiles. God’s truth went and should continue to go to the Jewish people first.

But some of those ringleaders of trouble from Thessalonica got the email and knew Paul was active in evangelism in Berea. These young thugs dogged Paul’s steps and disrupted his preaching. The local believers again sent Paul away and his next port of call was Athens.

As Lloyd Ogilvie says in his commentary on Acts says, “the preaching of the Gospel does stir up, excite, and unsettle old values and securities, demanding a decision, a turn around.” (The Communicator’s Commentary, Word Books, Waco, 1983, page 251)

Jewish reaction then was mixed. Some received Paul’s message and others gave it a miss. Some even went so far as to threaten and bully Paul out of town. By the way, those are exactly the three reactions we see in our days in Sydney and in Melbourne and throughout the world.

Paul’s Mars Hill sermon

Paul arrives in Athens and does his *modus operandi* of preaching in the synagogue. He ‘reasons’ the Bible says with people. This is not declaration only; it’s dialogue and intelligent debate at that. See some philosophic reactions. Some said, “let’s listen”; some labelled him a ‘babbler.’¹ There were some who thought his information ‘outside the box’ or as Luke says, “a proclaimer of foreign gods.” (v. 18) Luke’s unpacking of their desire to meet with Paul is carefully written in verse 21. “They spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.” In other words, they were not interested in learning; they wanted to read the National Enquirer of the day or watch the most prurient of television news reports, not to be informed. They wanted tickling and teasing.

In that context, Paul begins his *Areopagus* or Mars Hill sermon. He preaches to the two groups gathered, first, the Epicureans who lived for pleasure and today whose gods were nonexistent or remote. He also preaches to the Stoics whose life was determined by the gods and had to live according to the standards the gods set, without emotional involvement.

Paul began with where the people were thinking. He quoted their literature.² And he declared without compromise the word of the risen Saviour, Jesus who was no foreign

¹ Greek word is ‘spermologos’ meaning a seed-picker and had immediate reference to the birds, which flitted, about the plazas eating anything. It referred to learners who picked up bits of information from others’ teaching, but who didn’t really know what they were talking about. Might be a synonym for an undisciplined plagiarist.

² A phrase from Minos’s address to his father Zeus, “Thou art risen and alive forever, for in thee we live and move and have our being.” Also from a work of Epimenides the Cretan, “we also are his offspring.”

god, but was the Eternal One, the Living Creator of heaven and earth. He was the one and only God. And God confirmed this by the resurrection, no fanciful and 'new' story. This story was the truth and was to be believed by all men. Paul tells them to repent and believe.

If Paul had to lay out his sermon in three points, it might have been:

1) God is more than a mere philosophy. (vv. 16-21)

In talking to these philosophers, Paul makes a point of distinguishing God from the idolatry and philosophies of the culture. He's not just another deaf and mute idol made of metal, wood, or stone. He is beyond human comprehension.

2) God is active and He is near. (vv. 22-28)

Paul uses this opportunity to explain that not only is God more than some human philosophy, he goes on to explain that God has been active in the affairs of men from the beginning. He created the heavens and the earth, and places people where He wills. He is outside His creation and cannot be contained by it. He made men of every nation from one man to inhabit the earth.

And why did He do it? Verse 27 gives us the answer:

God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.

Unlike the gods of Greek and Roman theology who really had no use for man except to be used and exploited, the God of creation is actively involved in our lives, hoping that we will reach out to Him.

3) God will judge according to His standards, not men's.

Since God created us, He has the right to decide how to deal with us, whether on earth or facing the hereafter. This passage tells us that one day God will judge, and Jesus will be the judge.

The standard will be Jesus.

That's his sermon that morning in Athens. Phew! What *chutzpah*, what courage.

So let's look at the reaction of those people, the response to the proclamation that day.

The first response was

1. Rejection

Verse 32 says that when Paul was finished speaking, they sneered.

The attitude was that this was just a bunch of narishkeit, or as Gentiles say, hogwash that a thinking man couldn't possibly accept.

They chose to reject it. My prayer is that you do not do that. It is a mistake, and it will have eternal consequences, unless you come to your senses before it's too late. Because there will be plenty of second-guessing after you die, but there will be no second chance.

But if you have rejected God's offer in Jesus in the past, you have another opportunity this morning to change that. Don't leave here today holding God at arm's length.

The second response was

2. Request (more information)

Along with those who sneered, there were those who say, "We want to hear you again on this subject." (Verse 32)

That is a good option. If you are not yet ready to accept the claims of Christ as Saviour, but want more info, then I will do everything in my power to get you the information you need.

I love helping people see how Christ is everything He promised and how it not only gives us a guarantee of heaven, but changes lives as well.

Please visit with the pastoral staff here about that. You can call me in Bondi, or you can leave a note for Roger on the response card in your bulletin. We love to help people process this information that Jesus is Lord. It does work, it is true, but you may need more time to unpack this truth. Goodonya. Keep working on it.

The third option is

3. Reception

Look again at verse 34:

A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus court, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

Some were convinced that what Paul said was true, and they acted on it. They decided that this Jesus was really the Messiah, and that He held the keys to heaven.

If that is what you would like to do this morning, you will have the opportunity in just a moment.

I want to invite you to make Christ your Lord and Saviour by repenting of your sins and calling on Him for forgiveness and eternal life, believing that He died for you and rose from the grave.

The Bible says “all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved.” (Joel 2, Acts 2, Romans 10) And that is very good news.

Act on the words of God, will you?

We are going to pray. If you want to pray to take Christ as your Saviour today, I want you to pray along with me in your heart. Afterwards, we will have a few concluding remarks.

PRAYER

Final thought

I rejoice that someone or some ‘noble (or fair) minded’ folks in the sanctuary this morning have been listening and received the love of God in Y’shua. I hope you will make yourself known to me after the service, or that you will indicate this on your involvement card you filled out for Jews for Jesus. I would like to pray for you, if I might.

Now for all of us who know and love the Lord, there seems a subtle message in today’s sermon. But it might not be subtle to you. It’s a message of God’s wanting to use

you, whether you are a historian/doctor like Luke, a new convert like Jason and his unnamed colleagues, or a seasoned apostle/teacher like Paul, to do something. He wants to use us to share his love message to this waiting world, which will bring resultant interest and hostility at the same time. You may not have to travel over Asian hills or be kicked out of houses or synagogues, you may not have to leave the leafy North Shore, but you get to experience the same pleasure and pain that all who name Jesus as Lord have for centuries. Let's encourage each other to make Jesus known in Pymble and wherever you live and work and play. Let's take the proclamation of this Saviour on board, and have a life and commitment to lift up his name. If you do that, I can promise you God's pleasure and worldly reactions from those near you. It won't all be fairy floss, but it will be life for some near you. And they will thank you in eternity.

Thanks for listening to me today.

POSTSCRIPT: For those listening or reading online. During an interview section in the church service, I was interviewed about Jews for Jesus. In recent days, our offices in Bondi Junction and our personal vehicles have been vandalized to a financial tune of \$12,000. Some young Jewish 'thugs' have threatened further violence. In March some similar group as in Sydney destroyed our billboard in Melbourne. Just this weekend I hear from a sister outreach in Melbourne that their building was firebombed. Not all opposition is so illegal; most is simply acted out in shunning or harsh criticism. But if you want the pleasure of seeing people find Christ, you have to be willing to take the pain of opposition. I call us to trust the Living One to make us so connected to Himself, that we would take whatever they give as God's plan. Jesus went to the cross.