Sermon preached by Dr Augur Pearce on 10th May 2026

Readings: 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21; Acts 17:22-31

Easter VI

As we have already recalled, this is Eastertide. And during Eastertide, our Lectionary has treated us to a succession of different ways in which the first Christians showed their faith in the risen Christ. We heard Peter addressing Gentiles at Caesarea; Peter again, inviting a mixed crowd to receive baptism at Pentecost; we saw the communal living of an early Christian community, and the witness borne by Stephen's martyrdom. Today we encounter Paul on his travels, in one of the first accounts of his mission to an audience not yet converted (since his letters, of course, all speak to those who already share the faith).

What brings us together here is a broad acceptance of that Christian faith. But as we leave church this morning, we don't have to go very far to run into people and institutions which don't share that acceptance. Religious diversity is now held up by many as one of this country's strengths. Concessions are made to individual scruples – blinds round the swimming-pool to respect Muslim women's modesty, vegetarian meals to remove any question whether meat is halal or kosher. But there is an ongoing campaign against any vestiges of a Christian society – its success manifest in the city's de-Christianised Christmas decorations, in our groping for religiously neutral reasons to limit Sunday trading, in colleges wishing to drop the religious purpose from their statutes, in the surprise and even resentment shown at the Christian flavour of the Coronation.

If we take seriously the message of polls and surveys, or what we hear on Radio 4's 'Sunday' programme, we may have had hopes raised by talk of a 'Quiet Revival' of Christianity amongst younger people, only for those to be dashed again some weeks later by the pollsters admitting faults in their technique. But we have also heard, over a longer period, suggestions that many people who do not join any religious body or worship on a Sunday still admit to some undefined form of 'spirituality'. And that poses the question for English Christians today: how should we react to this? Do we ignore it, do we confront it, do we in some way build on it?

Paul comes face to face with this phenomenon at the Athenian altar 'to the unknown God'. As we have just heard, he builds on that. He identifies this deity, worshipped in Athens as 'unknown', as the Creator of all things, the source of life and breath and human existence. He retells the Easter message as evidence of God's working in the world, and declares that the One who was raised will ultimately come in judgment.

To us who are already familiar with Paul's message from other passages, what is particularly striking about this account is how he delivers it to this particular audience. He is not just tactful about Athenian religious variety: he actually respects it. (Luke, telling the story, refers to idolatry 'provoking Paul's spirit'; but this could just mean that Paul sees there his opportunity. The KJV wording 'You are too superstitious' becomes in the RV and later translations 'You are very religious'.) Paul implies that the city has already been worshipping the true God, though admittedly they had much to learn about him. He cites the insight of an Athenian poet. This approach bears fruit; for some at least of his hearers ask to hear more, and before he leaves Athens he can already record some converts.

In Paul's journeys we hear of the encounter of the classical world, to which we owe so much, with the message of Jesus Christ. Not for the first time, because Judaea and Galilee were already part of that classical world in the sense that they were Roman provinces or client-

states.; though the relationship there was a fraught one and there was a price to be paid for the order and commerce being part of Rome's Empire brought. Jesus himself had dealt with a centurion, with Roman taxation and had later on come face to face with Roman justice and political pressures. But in Athens and later Rome, Paul reaches the heart of classical antiquity; the source of so much philosophy and culture, technology and law to which we in Europe are heirs.

At this point I am reminded of many positive meetings between the worshippers of the God of Abraham and surrounding cultures: of Abraham himself and Melchizedek, of Joseph and his Pharaoh, of Solomon and Hiram of Tyre, of Cyrus and the exiles from Judah; even of Jesus with the Syro-Phoenician woman and other foreigners who sought his help. And of course I think of Constantine and the Empire's gradual move from persecution to toleration, then to emphatic support of Christianity.

This often raised for those worshippers the question how to respond to people with different insights, different starting-points from themselves. Should one avoid them altogether? Should one extract from them all that can be useful and then spit out the remainder, including their religion? Or can one take a more affirming line?

We met another example only a moment ago. The 4th-century hymn we just sang, 'Of the Father's love begotten', speaks of Jesus as the one of whom 'seers and sages sang in ages long gone by'. John Mason Neale's translation says, 'seer and sibyl', referring to the oracles or prophetesses found across ancient Greece, often respected as the mouthpiece of a god. The original Latin combines the two nouns *vates* and *prophetae*, one used for the prophets of paganism and the other for those of the Hebrew scriptures. The idea is that the hopes of both Classical civilisation and Hebrew tradition find fulfilment in Christ.

Of course this brings tension. One can cite commands given to the Israelites to keep themselves separate from certain of their neighbours, or the problems said to have flowed from Solomon's diverse harem, or Elijah's fairly extreme treatment of the prophets of Baal, or the attempts of various rulers to wean Jews or Christians away from the faith of their ancestors. Soon after Christianity gained Roman Imperial favour, a systematic withdrawal from the old official cult took place. Intolerance of other beliefs became a recurrent Christian characteristic, of which we cannot be particularly proud.

But it is down to us, as it was down to Paul, to work out a way through this tension: to find the right way to offer to our neighbours the same assurance, the same relationship, the same challenge, and – yes – the same Easter joy that we ourselves experience in our faith, without suggesting that all they already have is worthless. There are humanists and Unitarians who stand much closer to my own belief on some topics than mainstream Christian bodies, Mormons whose missionary commitment and systematic care for the unfortunate I admire, Jews from whom I am sure I have much to learn, Sikhs and Muslims whom I should never wish to hold back from worshipping God in their own way. This does not mean I want to drop my religion in favour of theirs, nor that I acknowledge any other cult as superior. For me at least Jesus is and will always be the Way to the Father. I suspect that is true of many of us.

At Easter we celebrate the culmination of the redeeming work of Christ on the Cross, the Christian conviction that the sacrifice of Good Friday was not in vain. That sacrifice, as some have thought in the past and maybe still think, was only for the benefit of an elect few. I have, as I don't mind admitting, never accepted that theory. For all of us there is at least the opportunity to come to God, to repent of our errors, to understand more and to worship accordingly. May we and all our neighbours continue to do so.

Amen.