

## Sixth Sunday of Easter (A)

### *Making Connections*

Acts 17:22–31; 1 Peter 3:13–22; Psalm 66:7–19

Over recent decades the church has moved from being close to the centre of our society to being on the edge. In the last census, nearly 50% of the population identified as having “no religion,” and Anglicans comprised less than 7%.

Rather than bemoaning this change, let’s see it as an opportunity to discover new ways of being church: fresh ways of sharing and living out the good news. Or, as the writer of today’s epistle puts it, to be ready to give an account of the hope that is in us – and to do it, as he says, with gentleness and respect. And as we do so, remember: the early church, out of which our Scripture readings come, was very much on the edge of society. Yet they turned their world upside-down.

So how do we make real connections – between the gospel and the lives people are actually living?

The passage from Acts gives us some clues. Paul is in Athens, the philosophical capital of the ancient world. He’s been doing his usual thing – going to the synagogue and debating with his fellow Jews – and he has been in the marketplace too, talking with the locals. Word gets around. What he has been saying about Jesus and the resurrection intrigues these sophisticated Athenians, so they bring him to the Areopagus – where the philosophers hang out – and ask him to tell them more.

In some ways, Athenian culture isn’t so dissimilar to ours. Like many people today, the Athenians were interested in spiritual matters. They had a reputation for curiosity, and Athens was a veritable forest of altars, shrines, and temples. While less than half of New Zealanders profess any level of religious adherence, that doesn’t mean we’re not a spiritual people. You will have heard it said, “I’m not religious, but I’m spiritual.” Of course, spirituality can mean almost anything, and people put together their own spiritual packages – which tells you they’re searching for something more.

We can easily assume that those around us aren’t interested in God, and so we say nothing – when in fact they are often very curious. But they don’t want to be judged or spoken to in religious language that’s totally foreign. This is how it was in Athens, and Paul makes the most of their curiosity.

Paul doesn’t condemn the different religious expressions he sees around the place, nor does he use a whole lot of jargon that would alienate his listeners. Instead, he looks for a point of connection and begins by speaking of the Athenians’ devotion. His technique is simple: he builds rapport with his audience.

“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.”

Paul goes on to make connections between Greek culture and the Jewish-Christian story. He’s not being judgemental. He doesn’t assume that just because his audience don’t worship as he does, they have no interest in spiritual things. He connects with people where they are. His instinct is to build bridges – a bridge between an unknown god and the known God.

How might that look like for us? To share the good news, we cannot keep our faith in a religious box called “church;” otherwise, we end up talking to ourselves. We need to be open to new ways of connecting with people in our common search for God. I learned this lesson some years ago at my gym.

My trainer at the time, a champion powerlifter, wanted to find out more about Christianity. He had visited several churches and would ask questions about why they believed certain things. He was frustrated because no one would explain the “whys,” and they seemed threatened by his questions. They would just say, “That’s how it is.” So, he asked me, because I was always asking him questions about his sport. There I was in the gym, having chats about God – usually between press-ups and deadlifts. As these conversations continued, we learned from each other. We made links between the sport of powerlifting and the Christian faith. That’s how Paul operated in Athens. It’s about making connections – noticing what matters to the people we meet and learning to speak a shared language.

People ask questions about faith and spirituality, but they don’t want their questions condemned or their searching judged. Rather, we share together in a common search for God. This is what Paul affirms: he encourages them in their searching. He builds on the inscription he saw on an altar – “To an unknown god.” Paul says to the Athenians that God created us to search for God – and, finally, to find God. After years of searching, Augustine of Hippo said something similar: “O God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you.”

We don’t need all the answers – simply a willingness to journey with others as they search. That searching can go on for a long time before someone finally connects with God. It’s a process helped when we realise, as Paul told the Athenians, that God doesn’t live in shrines made by human hands – not in buildings, nor in all the “stuff” that can fill our lives. God lives in people.

Paul is introducing the Athenians to a radical idea: that God is about relationship. We are, as he put it (quoting their own poets), “God’s offspring.” God isn’t far from each one of us. The life we’re offered – the life we’re to share – is one of relating: to each other and to God; God “in whom we live and move and have our being.”

Paul ends his speech to the Athenians by mentioning the resurrection of Jesus. It’s a risky move because it may mean rejection. Yet the resurrection is what differentiates the God Paul is proclaiming from everything else.

For some people, a Jesus who is alive today will be taking things too far, and they will walk away. That’s what Paul found. The bit that comes just after today’s reading from Acts tells how some scoffed at this talk of resurrection – but others asked to hear more. And some of those Paul was speaking with became believers.

That’s a helpful reminder for me, too. When I feel a conversation about faith seems to go nowhere, my instinct can be to become despondent, or to harden into defensiveness. But Paul shows another way: to be honest about what we believe, and to be gentle; to stay respectful; to leave room for people to keep wondering.

In the end, we’re not called to win arguments. We’re called to bear witness – usually in ordinary places: in a gym, over a cup of coffee, in the workplace, at the school gate, beside a hospital bed. If God really is “not far from each one of us”, then every honest conversation, every act of patience,

every moment of listening can become a bridge. And sometimes the most persuasive thing we can offer is simply our own story: to say, as the psalmist says:

Come then and listen ... and I will tell you what God has done for me.

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*Waiapu Cathedral – 10 May 2026*