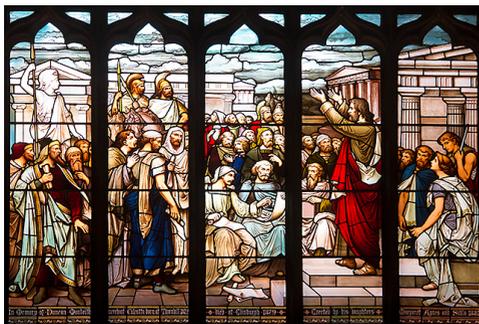


# Living truthfully before God

The sermon given by Rev Sheila Cameron at the St Margaret's Sung Eucharist  
on the Sixth Sunday of Easter, 7 May 2023

The readings were: Genesis 8:20–9:17; Acts 17:22–31; John 14:15–21



How we need that “Spirit of truth” that Jesus speaks of in today’s Gospel! The church has always had a tough challenge standing up to the spirit of the age and, as Christians, we need to gather together in places of safety in the midst of the storms of scepticism and materialism that assail us, enclosing ourselves within our own Arks, our own Church communities, like Noah and his family and all the animals, safe from the danger outside. Great public displays of faith, like the Coronation, can make us feel very proud of our heritage but also slightly nervous, in anticipation of a certain amount of negative feedback from sceptics- and that wasn’t hard to find in certain sections of the press last week, amid all the flag-waving rejoicing and support for our new monarch. One journalist (whose name escapes me) said, for example, that she’d found the Archbishop of Canterbury’s sermon incomprehensible. If I remember rightly, it was about being empowered to serve society and one another through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In the Easter season we draw inspiration from the Acts of the Apostles, which tells a story of great courage and joy and spiritual power in the face of an equally sceptical audience. Today’s reading starts at the beginning of a great speech by Paul to the Athenians, but the verse just before it gives us an interesting glimpse of life in ancient Athens. The Revised English Bible has the translation: “Now, all the Athenians and the resident foreigners had time for nothing except talking or hearing about the latest novelty.” This was a world very like our own, restless, endlessly seeking fresh stimulation and new versions of everything, unable or unwilling to commit to anything in much depth or settle down in one place for long; perhaps because the one commitment that might be the key to life, the commitment to Jesus Christ, had so far eluded them.

One of the most entertaining religious books I’ve read is A.J. Jacobs’ *The Year of Living Biblically*. Jacobs is like one of those attention-deficient Athenians, flitting from one philosophy, one religion, one topic to another, visiting each one only long enough to write a humorous account of it for New York’s *Esquire* magazine. Jacobs is a non-religious American Jew who sets himself the project of reading the Bible from cover to cover, both Old and New Testaments, and listing all the rules and regulations he can find (seventy-two pages of them in all, when he has transcribed them), and then spending a year trying to follow them literally.





This involves a lot of costume drama as he mimics an Orthodox Jew: growing a beard and leaving its corners untrimmed, sewing tassels to the corners of his garments, buying a ram's horn in a gift shop to blow at the beginning of each month, pinning commandments to his clothing as instructed in Deuteronomy 11. Eventually he parades around the city wearing a long white robe. He doesn't do these things out of any real sense of calling to serve God, but as an entertaining project for his next book. This author is a caricature of a religious person, but throughout his otherwise silly book the serious questions lurk: "Will any of this actually rub off on him?" "Could this experience actually *change* him for the better?" I found myself hoping that his obsession with external observances would in the end turn this man into a genuinely religious person – and indeed it does to some extent, but only after a very shocking event. While he has been engrossed in all his dressing up and parading around town, his neighbour, whom he normally keeps an eye on, has died in her flat and her body has lain undiscovered for many days. And so, ultimately, Jacobs's project could be judged a complete failure, for he has neglected one of the most important of God's commandments, love of neighbour – and it's that realisation that changes him.

Love of neighbour, compassion, service – alongside faith and love of God, those are the hallmarks of the true Christian. We long for the faith proclaimed so publicly at the Coronation to be deep and genuine for those who witnessed it. We long for long-lasting and life-changing conversions, while at the same time continuing to offer friendship and welcome to people of other faiths and none. While we offer respect to

all, dare we hope that people will discover in Christ the answer to their genuine spiritual needs? In Acts 17, we see Paul addressing the scepticism of his own age, and pointing to the *hunger for truth* that lay behind it. The Areopagus was a large rock in the centre of Athens which served as a public forum and a place of trial, and Paul was taken there to be interrogated about the new faith in Jesus and the Resurrection which he had been preaching around the city. The Athenians were more curious than hostile and Paul began by flattering them: they were so *religious*, he said, for they had so many shrines! He even found an altar dedicated "to an unknown god." What an opportunity this was to tell them about the God who is the Father of Jesus Christ, the God they knew existed but did not yet know or understand.

What is so enormously impressive about this speech is how Paul *identified* with his audience. He showed them how familiar he was with their thinking; he referred to their commonly held beliefs – that there was a creator god; that this god had no need of anything from humans, including being worshipped in temples built by human hands; and yet this god was *available* to those who reached out to him. Indeed, he is very close, "for in him we live and move and have our being," says Paul. These words are so familiar to us that it may come as a surprise to learn that they were probably written by a Greek poet in the 6th century BC (Epimenides). And then, says Paul, "We are his offspring" – a quotation from another Greek poet who lived in the 3rd century BC (Aratus). Paul established a rapport with his audience by showing them he was no stranger to their poetry and also their philosophy.





When he talks about resurrection, Paul's audience splits into three camps: those who scoff; those who are interested and want to know more; and those who believe – because what Paul is saying is something they want to hear. Greek philosophy didn't care much for the body but was interested in the immortality of the soul; now here was Paul talking about *the resurrection of the body* and some were very sceptical. But here was something new that many wanted to hear: a message about a god *who cared about humanity* so much that he came down from heaven to enter into our life in the person of Jesus, who died then rose again from the dead. Greek gods were thought to live in another realm and not to be particularly interested in mortals: this was something new and extraordinary.

Paul won the respect of his hearers, and what an important lesson that is for all of us. In the sharing of our faith it is so important to establish a foundation of common ground with our neighbours, to be friendly and concerned, generous and respectful. We don't need to quote the Bible or recite the history of the church to explain the gospel. Shared culture, shared history, concern for others, common life experience and above all, *willingness to spend time with others* all provide excellent starting points to begin communicating our faith by our presence, interest, kindness, good humour and *joy*.

Living the Christian faith in these sceptical times has been described by serious theologians as a kind of theatrical performance, for it involves assuming a role, playing a part, adopting a certain persona and knowing our play-script, the Bible, well; but unlike A.J. Jacobs's plan to spend just one year living biblically

and dressing up like a character in a pantomime to do so, or indeed putting on a grand public display of pageantry and liturgy, our faith is not a superficial thing or a passing fancy but a role we inhabit profoundly, to the core of our being; it is living *truthfully* with others in the sight of God.

To do this well, we need the gift of God's Holy Spirit. Baptised in the Spirit, and as members of the body of Christ, we have moved with him from death to life, from darkness to light, and our calling is to live his risen life, to bring life to others and to give light to the world. Amen.

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Our picture is of a stained glass panel that you can see at St Giles' Cathedral, Edinburgh, made available through Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/ywjfczc8>.