

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

We've got some really great texts this morning that I think, each in their own way, speak to the times we are living in. Many of us are troubled by the public face of Christianity that is being promoted these days, a distorted version of Christianity coopted by political and social agendas that have nothing to do with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Some of you were part of the book group discussion last Tuesday that took up just this topic. Happily, these readings today provide us with an antidote, a contrasting vision of what God is really up to in Jesus and in the life of the church by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Before I get into those texts, though, a quick reminder of the trajectory of this long Easter season and how it's meant to work on us. The first few Sundays of Easter helped us get to grips with the reality of Jesus' resurrection in the face of our experience of the brutal finality of death. Then we shifted to how that new reality changes our lives. And now we are in the last phase, preparing for the life of the church in the world after Jesus' return to the Father – what it might look like to live out our changed lives in light of Jesus' death and resurrection. And also, by implication, what the life of faith does *not* look like.

Our second reading from First Peter is a good place to start, because it sets the tone for the other two. Peter is directly addressing how someone representing the Christian faith would most effectively do that. First, he says, expect to be questioned about your faith, or what he calls “the hope that is in you,” and don't lose an opportunity to defend that faith. Second, when you have that opportunity to make a response, don't be a jerk about it. Instead, be “gentle and reverent.” Give your opponents no cause to speak ill of you because of your bad behavior. Third, expect that you will be maligned. Peter knew that's what people are all too ready to do. And he didn't even know about social media. But he didn't have to. Human nature hasn't changed. Expect to be maligned, wrote Peter. It's going to happen whatever you say. Just make sure that *you* are above legitimate reproach, so that when you are maligned it is the shameful behavior of your attackers and not your own that is exposed.

This leads us to our first reading from Acts, where Paul finds himself in Athens. This was the Cambridge, Massachusetts, or the Oxford, England of the ancient world. It's where the thought leaders of the day were to be found. And Paul was there putting Peter's advice into practice. He was using his opportunity to speak about the faith, but he was doing it in a very tactful way. You might not have caught just how tactful he's being, because our reading starts after the story has already begun. If we back up a little, we learn that when Paul gets to Athens he is “deeply distressed” by all of the idols in the city. It's kind of what the Greeks and Romans are famous for, the statues of their gods. And Paul, being a good Jewish boy, naturally finds this upsetting. If there's anything he learned growing up Jewish it was that making idols is off limits. It's what Jews were famous for: not worshipping idols. But notice what Paul does *not* do. He does not go all fire-and-brimstone campus-quad-preacher on them and harangue them about their idols. No. He looks around town. He familiarizes himself with their idols and their places of worship. He gets to know them. And then he begins his speech by *complimenting* them. “I see how very religious you are.” And then he brings up one of the altars he saw, dedicated to “an unknown god,” and he uses that to talk about God the creator of heaven and earth and the father of Jesus. And he finishes his speech by quoting, not the Jewish Bible, but their own poets, who

spoke of God as the one “in whom we live and move and have our being” and also that we are God’s offspring.

So that’s the first thing to notice about Paul’s speech here: how culturally sensitive it is. But the second thing to notice is that within his tactful, sensitive approach he is presenting a real alternative to the religious outlook of his audience, which is all about making offerings to the gods in order to appease them. God doesn’t actually need your offerings, he tells them. This is not the kind of transactional relationship that you’re used to with your gods, where you give them something they need and they give you something you need. It doesn’t work that way with the God and Father of Jesus, the world’s creator. God gives freely to all of us everything that we need. We don’t have to pay or barter for it. It’s a gift.

And that in turn leads into our Gospel reading, where Jesus is preparing his disciples for his return to the Father. There’s a famous anthem by Thomas Tallis that I hear in my head every time I read this text. You’ve heard the choir sing it several times in the past decade. It’s a beautiful piece. But that anthem reflects the older King James translation, “if you love me, keep my commandments.” It puts the verb in the imperative and makes this an order, as if to say, “keep my commandments if you really love me.” Our translation is more in line with the spirit of Paul’s approach with the Athenians. “If you love me, [then] you *will* keep my commandments.” And what are Jesus’ commandments? Well, just in the previous chapter of John he gave the disciples a new commandment, to love one another as he has loved them. So their keeping of the commandment of loving one another will happen naturally, as a result of Jesus’ love for them. Because he loves them, they can love him and one another. And he assures them that they will have help in this, a helper and an advocate in the “Spirit of truth,” which one commentator I read prefers to translate as the “truthful Spirit.”

How does all of this connect with us and our times? I think you’ve probably seen the connections already. Going in reverse order, the truth and truthfulness matter, and tact and sensitivity in witnessing to the faith are biblical values, as are gentleness and reverence. You have noticed how so often in our context Christians end up being defensive about their faith, asserting their rights at the expense of others, and attacking their attackers. That’s what makes Peter’s advice and Paul’s example so striking. All of these readings lead us to understand that if we trust the gospel’s promise of life, then we can be confident enough to express that faith gently and tactfully in our dealings with others. If we love Jesus, then we will be loving to each other and to those to whom we give an account of our hope and faith. And if we *cannot* do that, if we cannot be gentle, tactful, respectful and loving in our relations with others, then we might want to ask whose spirit, and whose agenda, is really at work in us.

Just as we didn’t get the beginning of the story of Paul in Athens in our first reading, we didn’t get its ending either. The reaction of the crowd was mixed. Some scoffed at him, but others wanted to hear more. And some of them, it turned out, joined him and became believers. That’s what being the church in the world is. It’s not about winning the culture wars. It is not about imposing God’s will on others, which so often ends up being about *our* will and not God’s. And it’s certainly not about garnering automatic respect and deference merely for signaling our religiosity or dropping Jesus’ name. Being the church in the world is about gentle, tactful, humble persistence in love, often in the face of skepticism, suspicion, and even outright hostility. And this isn’t something we are left to manage alone. It is God’s work in us through Jesus by the power of the Holy and truthful Spirit, which we’ll be talking more about in coming weeks as we approach Pentecost.

May we treasure the gift of God's grace, trust its promise, and reflect in our words and deeds the life-changing, world-transforming Good News that Christ is risen, Alleluia! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!)