

Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, May 13th 2015

Paul's famous speech to the Athenians — was it a success or a failure? Some scholars, noting that the response was not huge (like, say, the response to Peter's speech on Pentecost), call this speech a failure. They suggest that Luke included it as an example of how not to preach. This one, they claim, was more "natural theology" rather than thoroughly Christ-centered preaching. Others, however, say that Paul took the people where they were — they were pagans, after all — and he told them, what you worship as "the unknown god" I'm here to tell you who that is — the one God who made us and everything else. And this God has revealed himself in creation itself and especially in a particular man, Jesus, who really is the measure of our lives. Indeed, even the immediate response to this one speech was not zero; a number of people became believers right then and there, and they included Dionysius, a member of the Court of the Areopagus, and one Damaris. Luke would not have included these names if they had not become people known to his readers as eventually outstanding members of the church.

The teaching of Vatican Council II has helped us see that this speech was really a fine example for the practice of interreligious dialogue. For example, *Nostra aetate*, ("In Our Time"), Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, begins with a paragraph that alludes to this very speech of Paul: "All people form but one community. This is so because all stem from the one stock which God created to people the entire earth (Cf. Acts 17:26) and because all share a common destiny, God. . . . People look to their different religions for an answer to unsolved riddle of human existence. . . ." The council fathers then proceed to stress the importance of approaching practitioners of other religions, and even atheists, as fellow creatures of the one God, and they advise us to begin our dialogues with them with what we have in common. They state,

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways for her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all people.

This appreciation, of course, does not stop Christians from proclaiming their convictions about finding in Jesus Christ as the way, the truth and the life. But the starting point is profoundly different from approaching the "others" by beginning the conversation by focusing on how we are different. I recall growing up with the attitude that the main thing about non-Christians, and even Christians of other denominations, was that they were utterly different from me and my faith. Fifty years ago, Vatican Council II, help us change our starting point with those "others" back to Paul's approach to the Athenians. Let's let Paul and Vatican II convince us to first seek what we have in common with those who worship differently.