

EASTER: A TIME TO REJOICE

Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 29, 2011

Acts 17:22-31

Psalm 66:8-20

1 Peter 3:13-22

John 14:15-21

Unmasking Idolatry with the Good News

Ever notice how the gospel is an offense to many, even to those who profess to be religious? The Acts pericope opens with Paul waiting in Athens for Silas and Timothy, his colleagues in the ministry.

The trio had openly preached the gospel in the worship places in Thessalonica and won some converts, but jealous town leaders hired a bunch of vigilantes to start a riot and blame it on the group. Escaping by night, the three men went to Berea where they were more warmly received...that is until the leaders from Thessalonica got wind of their success and showed up to start a bitter uprising. Paul's followers stealthily sent him off to Athens, while the other two hid in Berea until it was safe to join him.

So, Paul's visit in Athens was not as a tourist with a map and a guide book in hand, but as a fugitive from a rabid, religious lynch mob who was opposed to his preaching the gospel of Christ. The Athenians, however, eager to hear and debate new doctrine, invite Paul to speak so they can hear the message of the Messiah. In his address to them, Paul points out that he has observed their many religious idols, including the altar which they had built to "An Unknown God." Having a willing and receptive audience, Paul proceeds to explain the true identity of God and the Good News of Jesus.

Like the Athenians, many of us worship an "unknown God," not really knowing who he is, or experiencing his awesome power to save. We sway with each emerging doctrine and build new altars daily to accommodate the distractions in our lives. The apostle Paul upbraids this behavior and states that "In the past God forgave all this because people did not know what they were doing. But now he says that everyone everywhere must turn to him. He has set a day when he will judge the world's people with fairness" (Acts 17:30, 31a, *CEV*).

We can no longer claim ignorance because now we know...God is *not* an idol. "He is Lord of heaven and earth, and he doesn't live in temples built by human hands" (Acts 17:24b, *CEV*). Why, then, is the Body of Christ silent as we watch idols being built all around us? Idols of power, greed, corruption, fornication, lies, and disobedience spring up in the most unlikely places. Is it that we fear persecution? The Scriptures say, "Even if

you have to suffer for doing good things, God will bless you. So stop being afraid and don't worry about what people might do" (1 Peter 3:14, *CEV*).

Our world is in shambles, just as Paul's was. Report after report, in city after city, indicates that our leaders have betrayed our trust. What do we do? What is our role? How shall we live? First, we must "honor Christ and let him be Lord of [our] life" (1 Peter 3:15, *CEV*). We need to remember that Jesus' promise to his disciples, and to us, still holds true: "If you love me, you will do as I command. Then I will ask the Father to send the Holy Spirit who will help you and always be with you" (John 14:15b,16, *CEV*).

What a comforting thought! We need God's Holy Spirit now more than ever. There is much work to do and it starts with us. Jesus' instruction to equip us for this journey called life is powerful and insightful: "Stay joined to me and let my teaching become part of you. Then, you can pray for whatever you want, and your prayer will be answered" (John 15:7, *CEV*).

Let us hold fast to the profession of our faith, knowing that prayer is, indeed, a powerful weapon, given to us by Jesus himself. Later, we can look back and say triumphantly with the psalmist:

All who worship God,
come here and listen;
I will tell you everything
God has done for me.

Psalm 66:16, *CEV*

This week's Reflection was prepared by Dorette Saunders (now retired) who served on the staff of the American Bible Society as Senior Editor of the Education Unit in the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship, and continues as a consultant to ABS.

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This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: Slovenia – with thanks to God that the annual Bible Marathon has been welcomed by the Catholics and by all other churches, and that from it a new program, *Developing a Bible Reading Culture*, has emerged; and with prayers that this will create a new need for the Word of God in the liberal, secular society, and that the Lord will lead and guide these efforts so that many committed brothers and sisters will join in Bible work ; **Croatia** – with thanks to God that new opportunities have opened up to distribute Scriptures in hospitals and libraries; and with prayers that through this, good relationships will develop and enable the Society to reach many people; also pray for the ongoing work on the *New Croatian Bible* translation project, that Scripture sales will increase and that there will be sufficient resources to continue Bible work in the face of harsh economic conditions caused by the recession; **Bosnia-Herzegovina** – with thanks to God for Bible work carried out jointly by the Bible Societies in neighboring Croatia and Serbia-Montenegro; and with prayers for the safety of staff as they travel, as ethnic tensions remain high; also pray that Christians will have access to the Bible and that they will read and draw strength from it;

Serbia & Montenegro – with thanks to God for the launch of Mark’s Gospel in Romani, for the Student Bible Guides and for the Society’s book for young children; and with prayers that the book will enhance the work among young people, and that Mark’s Gospel will be well received; also pray for the translation of the Old Testament into Serbian, for the plan to distribute Scriptures in Niš, Emperor Constantine’s birthplace , and that God will enable the society to use the opportunities it will bring.

Activity Corner: “Good News” Letters

Supplies needed: Bible; writing paper; pens/pencils; construction paper (assorted colors) or white drawing paper; crayons/markers.

Read together Psalm 66. Verse 16 (*CEV*) says, “I will tell you everything God has done for me.” Gather as a family and write messages of encouragement to homebound persons in your church or community, or to a missionary your church may be sponsoring. Younger children can make cards or drawings.