

The Areopagus Address ¹

It is a little over nineteen centuries this summer since Luke the physician wrote in brief and competent Greek the story of an adventure in Athens. The narrative contains the compact outline of a speech made by the writer's friend Paul, the Jew of Tarsus, before the Court of Areopagus. It may be read today, in exquisite Greek lettering, on an oblong bronze plaque set in the rocky face of the worn outcrop of stone beneath the commanding mass of the Acropolis. The Athenians called the rock mound the Hill of Ares, or the Areopagus.

The story is found in the Seventeenth Chapter of the *Acts of the Apostles*. Simply translated, it runs thus:

While Paul was waiting for his friends in Athens, he was deeply stirred to see the city given over to idols. And so in the synagogue he debated with the Jews and their adherents, and in the market-place every day with any he chanced to meet. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic Philosophers met him, and some of them said: 'What is the purpose of this picker-up of oddments?' And others said: 'He appears to be a preacher of foreign deities'—for Paul was preaching the Gospel of Jesus and the Resurrection. So they brought him urgently to the Hill of Ares, saying: 'May we know this new teaching of which you speak? For you bring to our hearing matters quite strange to us. And so we want to know what these things mean.' (All the Athenians and the strangers residing there spent their leisure in nothing else but talking and hearing about something new.) . . . Paul stood in the middle of the Hill of Ares and said: 'Athenians, I observe that in every way you are uncommonly religious, for going about and looking at the objects of your worship, I even found an altar on which was inscribed TO THE UNKNOWN GOD! That which you worship, therefore, in ignorance, I am making known to you. God who made the universe and all that it contains, He, the Lord from all time of the heavens and the earth, does not dwell in temples which hands have made, nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed something, giving, as He does to all, life, and

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breath, and everything. And He made of one blood every race of men, causing them to dwell upon all the face of the earth, marking out from their boundaries in time, and their place of habitation, and prompting them to seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and discover Him, though indeed He is not far from any one of us. For in Him we live, and move, and indeed, exist, as some of your own Stoic poets have said: "For we are also His offspring." Being therefore, by the nature of things, God's offspring, we ought not to think that the Divine is like gold, or silver, or stone, carved work of man's devising. Well, then, the times of ignorance God overlooked, but now calls on all men everywhere to repent because He has set a day in which He purposes to judge the world in righteousness, by the Man Whom He has appointed, giving assurance to all men by raising Him from the dead.' Having heard of a resurrection of the dead, some scoffed. Others said: 'We shall hear you again about this.' So Paul came out from their company. But some men remained with him and believed. Among whom was Dionysius, a member of the Court of the Hill of Ares, a woman named Damaris, and others along with them.¹

The circumstances merit an effort of the imagination. Paul had come alone to the great city, somewhat troubled and anxious. Northern Greece, his first encounter with Europe, had seen stormy experience, and in Athens, suffering some reaction, Paul was a prey to that sharp loneliness felt by sensitive spirits amid an alien throng, and in an environment which disturbs and repels. And it seems clear that Athens did appear to Paul of Tarsus, for all his deep understanding of the Greeks, a hostile and uncongenial place in the summer of A.D. 50.

The reasons are not far to seek. Those who view with wonder the magnificence of Athens' ruined heart today, are without the Jew's deep loathing of idolatry. The modern visitor who climbs the steps through the Propylaea, and sees the breath-taking majesty of the shattered Parthenon, mellow in its golden marble, superbly placed, has no thought of Athene, who once stood in the dim interior, the object of man's devotion. He may trace the base of another colossal image of Athens' patron goddess in the precinct. It stood with spear upraised so high that sailors off Sunion caught the sun's glint on its point from forty miles away. When the blond Goths intruded at the beginning of the dark fifth century after Christ, they scattered in wild flight at the

¹ Acts, xvii. 16-34. Trans. E. M. Blaiklock.

first sight of the image. The modern visitor standing on the flat foundation regrets the destruction of a great statue. The reverence of the Athenian, the terror of the Goth, the repugnance of the Jew for blasphemy in bronze and stone, mean nothing to him.

Perhaps the Christian can still touch the edge of that deep sensation only in the revolting presence of the phallic image. Some fragments, vast and intricately carved on Delos, reveal the gross mingling of carnality and religion which stirred the wrath of the Hebrew prophets, and which evoke a Christian disgust. The sculptured sensualities of some Eastern temples stir the same nausea. Athens must have had examples enough of this baser use of Greek art. Athene Promachos and the Wingless Victory were not its only creations. There were the crude herms of every common street, and if evidence is needed to prove that these rough cult images were something more than decoration, there is the *cause célèbre* which their wanton desecration once provoked, a serious crisis in Athenian political and judicial history.¹ So real was idolatry.

Another reason for Paul's disturbance of spirit is more elusive. Perhaps he caught the atmosphere of Athens' decadence. There is no exhilaration in the twilight of a great culture. Luke, often a master of brief irony,² felt the shallow artificiality of the place. 'All the Athenians, and strangers residing there,' he wrote, 'spent their leisure in nothing else but talking and hearing about something new.' To this cult of curiosity had the old Greek sense of wonder deteriorated. Even in the great creative days, Athenian curiosity had shown its shabbier side in a manner which infuriated orators as diverse as the crude Cleon and the patriot Demosthenes. 'You are spectators in displays of oratory,' shouted the former in 427 B.C.,³ 'and listeners to the tales of others' doings.' Half a century later, the great Demosthenes, striving in vain to awaken a declining people to the menace of that oddly Hitler-like person, Philip the Second of Macedon, asked ironically: 'Do you like walking about and asking one another: Is there any news? Why, could there be greater news than a man of Macedon subduing Athenians, and directing the affairs of Greece?'⁴ 'Is there any news?' Demosthenes' adjective is the very one used by Luke in the comment quoted—'some new thing'.

The great orator's scorn was four centuries old when Paul came to Athens. Decadence, indeed, had been sharp and swift from the high

¹ Thuc. vi. 28.

² Cf. Acts, xix. 32.

³ Thuc. iii. 38.

⁴ *Phil.* i. 43.

days of the fifth century. The fearful tension of the Thirty Years' War with Sparta which closed the Golden Age, whose effects were so terribly diagnosed by Thucydides,¹ was the major cause of decline. The judicial murder of Socrates was one of the first symptoms. Plato's stern authoritarianism was a reaction. So were the philosophies of escape and resistance of a century later, the doctrines of Epicurus and the Stoics.

But strangely, the city still lived on the brief glory of the astonishing fifth century. Athens does still. The modern philhellene peoples the agora with the Greeks of Pericles, not with those of Luke, or even of Epicurus and Demosthenes. The voice of that short noontide of confidence, achievement, and endeavour comes too loud and clear. The Parthenon, and the fragments of the magnificence which surrounded it, set proudly on the incomparable platform of the Acropolis, still speak in lasting stone of a generation aflame with the memory of a mighty victory over mortal peril from Asia, of a people which saw nothing too difficult for their creating. Pen, too, vied with chisel to create memorials of a burst of high endeavour which left a mark on history, for a Golden Age is inevitably one when artist and people know no division, when literature is a nation's voice, and art its truest awareness. Here are the Athenians of that day's passionate patriotism, caught in a chorus from Euripides' *Medea*²:

*The sons of Erechtheus the olden
Whom high gods planted of yore,
In an old land of heaven upholden,
A proud land untrodden of war.
They are hungered and, lo, their desire,
With wisdom is fed as with meat,
In their skies is a shining of fire
And joy in the fall of their feet.
And thither with manifold dowers
From the north, from the hills, from the morn,
The muses gathered their powers
That a child of the Nine should be born.
And Harmony, sown as the flowers,
Grew gold in the acres of corn.*

The Golden Age had no afternoon, 'Men build their empire', writes D. L. Page 'out of poverty and hardship; then rest awhile to enjoy their comfort and security; later, since peace and plenty breed satiety, a

¹ Thuc. iii. 82, 83.

² *Medea*, 824-5.

generation which has not toiled demands repose no longer, convention and comfort recreate the restless and the critical, decline or change comes quickly. The tragic difference of Athens was that she omitted the intermediate phase. She climbed to the peak of her mountain and rushed straight down without stopping to enjoy the prospect. Athens had no Victorian age.¹ Its achievements, to be sure, lived on to daunt and to inspire, while its taste, its thought, its spirit found some form of interpretation and expression in the Hellenism which spread through the world in Alexander's wake, and coloured the thinking of men like Stephen and Paul. The Silver Age of literature and art which took shape at Alexandria was its by-product, and to that era and its real achievement the literature of Rome owed much. The world at large recognised all this. Hence the amazing success with which another Athens lived on its vanished past. Conquerors spared it for no other reason. Under Rome Athens was a 'free city', and this was more than 'the contemptuous boon of an unfettered loquacity', as Dean Farrar put it in a purple passage.² Hadrian's adornment of the city reveals the genuine love and admiration her reputation could still inspire in men of another race. 'Captive Greece', as Horace put it, could still 'take captive her fierce conqueror.'

Of 'unfettered loquacity' there was, of course, enough and to spare, and any reincarnated Aristophanes, abroad in a modern University city, or indeed in the Church might make a sardonic retort to the Dean. But Paul had small regard for such shallow culture. His sturdy faith could be pungently contemptuous of aimless philosophies.³ His shrewd mind must have noted the speculation for speculation's sake, and the glib talk for the sake of talking, the old vice of sophistry which Aristophanes and Plato had flayed, turned then, as never before, cynically to profit. He must have observed the commercialisation of knowledge and culture, the horde who lived by wits and words, in short, all the sham, the artificiality, the dishonesty, and empty pride of a city living on its past, its ghosts, and its relics. The encounter was no joyous experience to a Jew of Tarsus ardent for truth.

It was disturbing, too, to be taken for yet another fortune-seeker, eager to sell his doctrine. 'What', they asked, observing his Socratic activities in the agora, 'does this "seed-picker" want?' The word was Athenian slang. It was used by Aristophanes in his uproarious comedy *The Birds*⁴ to signify the busy winged things of the meadows, snapping

¹ Intro. Euripides' *Medea*, ix.

² *Life and Work of Saint Paul*, ed. 1884, ch. xxvii.

³ Col. ii. 8.

⁴ *Birds*, 233, 580.

up the chance fallen seed, the pert sparrows and finches of the furrows. In Athenian vernacular it came to mean the sophistic picker-up of scraps of learning, the liver on his words and wits, a 'babbling' only in the sense that such charlatans were compelled to talk long and persuasively to conceal the second-hand, second-rate quality of their doctrine. The word is an authentic echo of the crowded agora, where Paul, conforming easily to Athenian tradition as old as Socrates, met the inquisitive quick-tongued populace, joined in the animated discussion which was the habit and manner of their market-place, and attracted the attention of the Stoics and Epicureans.

Hence a polite summons to appear before the Court of the Areopagus which the philosophers of both schools seem to have controlled. They were rivals for the attention of their day, for the Greek lacked somewhat the Roman penchant for eclecticism which enabled urbane folk like Horace to be Stoic and Epicurean at one and the same time. Within a mile of the agora were the Gardens of Epicurus. The Stoa Poikile, from which the Stoics took their name, closed the end of the market-place. Paul was in the ancient centre and capital city of both philosophies, four centuries after their first foundation. At Athens both were professed with academic exclusiveness.

Both Epicureanism and Stoicism had been the response of a stricken generation to a world grown harsh and hostile with the passing of an era. Zeno of Citium, founder of the Stoic school, lived from 340 to 260 B.C. Epicurus' dates almost exactly coincide. They are 342 to 270 B.C. It was, in Toynbee's phrase, the Hellenic Time of Troubles.¹ The Greek states had become the protectorates of Macedon. Liberty, abused everywhere when the city-states enjoyed it, was lost under foreign autocracy. Unity, elusive or scorned when it could have been found by free-will and a common purpose, had been imposed rough-handedly by the half-barbarous kingdom of the north. Stoicism and Epicureanism were a spiritual reaction and response. Each in its own way, the two systems sought to fortify souls in torment at the spectacle of political breakdown, and provide code and dogma in a sombre age of tension.

To understand Paul's address it is necessary to look a little more closely at the two philosophic systems followed by his audience. It must have been about the year 320 B.C. when Epicurus, the son of a schoolmaster of Samos, discovered the atomic theory of Democritus of Abdera. Atoms, Democritus taught, small indivisible particles variously shaped,

¹ *Study of History*, i. 53, 89.

form the universe. Plunging through the void with velocities proportioned to their size, these fundamental particles clash with one another forming, in this fashion, coherent groups. The world and all that is in it is thus made. Chance alone rules, and infinite time, with the infinite variations, congregation, and cohesion of the basic material, has produced things animate and inanimate.

It was materialism thorough and absolute. The soul and mind, according to Democritus, was atomic in structure, atoms round and mobile, and infinitely subtle. Sight, hearing, taste, were the impinging of atoms on the senses, themselves material in composition and structure. Hence in the midst of a virtual atheism, Epicurus' need to admit the existence of deities. In dreams and visions of the night such beings became part of human consciousness, and, caught by his own system, Epicurus could only explain such mental phenomena by his theory of vision. Films of atoms, given off by tangible realities, however subtle, formed the stuff of dreams.

But he denied that such contacts with another order of being implied a theology of involvement. The gods cared nothing for man. As Tennyson puts it in the choric song of *The Lotus Eaters*,

*. . . they lie beside their nectar, and the bolts are hurl'd
Far below them in the valleys, and the clouds are lightly curl'd
Round their golden houses, girdled with the gleaming world:
Where they smile in secret, looking over wasted lands,
Blight and famine, plague and earthquake, roaring deeps and fiery sands,
Clanging fights, and flaming towns, and sinking ships, and praying
hands.
But they smile, they find a music centred in a doleful song
Steaming up, a lamentation and an ancient tale of wrong . . .*

Behind such physical doctrine lay Epicurus' passionate quest for peace of mind. He saw religion, the hope or fear of survival, the expectation of judgment, a power which punished, cared or interfered, as disturbance for the soul, and a poison of its peace. Let man seek only happiness, and happiness, in a world so material, could only be pleasure.

Hence the inevitable betrayal of Epicurus by human nature. The word 'epicurean' suggests to modern ears a selfish seeker after creature comfort. An 'epicure' is, in its better meaning, one who cultivates a fine taste at the table, at its nether end, a mere glutton. The elegant Petronius, or the Horace of more than one ode, are to the casual student of antiquity, the 'epicureans' of the past rather than the good master

himself, who was something of a saint, and far from carnal. For such misunderstanding the system must bear its share of blame. Pleasure is too subjective a word, too charged with the experience of sense, easily to bear a philosophic meaning.

Epicureanism was, therefore, rapidly corrupted by those who sought a philosophic cloak for self-indulgence. The speech of Cicero against Piso, an oration which, in point of fact, does the great orator little credit, contains a good illustration. A Greek told Piso of a philosophy which enthroned pleasure as the highest good. 'A truly dangerous word', says Cicero, 'for a young man not notable for his intelligence'.¹ Piso laid hold of such information avidly. 'He neighed at the word,' says Cicero. The Greek tried to explain what Epicurus meant by pleasure, but Piso had his dogma and was in no mood to have it watered down, and as for the Greek, who was he to differ too vehemently from a magistrate of Rome?

Such misapprehension was inevitable. The shrewd Roman Fabricius saw its significance while Epicurus was still alive. The story goes that Pyrrhus' ambassador told the Romans of the philosopher in 282 B.C., and the Roman consul displayed a shrewd knowledge of human nature when he expressed the hope that Epicurus would win many converts among the Samnites, indeed among all the enemies of Rome. The yoke in fact was too easy, but this is the limit of Epicurus' blame. The master, rightly understood, exalted virtue as true pleasure's prerequisite, and pointed the way to peace, not debauchery. Seneca, who had no brief for him, wrote: 'I dare to state, in the face of the opinions of some, that the ethics of Epicurus are sane, upright, even austere, for the man who penetrates their depth.'²

The true sage, Epicurus taught, curbed passion, scorned excess, lust, ambition, for all have aftermath of pain. He narrowed desire, that disappointment, anxiety, apprehension, desire's by products, might not ruffle his calm, sought health, quietness, simplicity, for all are part of the unseen unenvied way, pursued, in short, a species of quietism, without much doctrine save the view of physics on which so much depended, and without mystery or complication. Virile souls may have turned more readily to Stoicism. The timid of a disillusioned age found more obvious escape in Epicureanism.

There is no means of knowing the colour or temper of the Epicureanism held by the philosophers of Paul's audience. They were academic types, sound, no doubt, in doctrine, virtual atheists in consequence,

¹ *In Pisonem*, xxviii.

² *De vita beata*, 14.

contemptuous of all belief in divine care for human virtue, human sin, or human life at large. Josephus, who described the Epicureans as the Sadducees of the Athenian philosophic world, probably touched the truth. The worldly Jewish sect, holding doctrine lightly, and denying another life, the resurrection and the judgment, were not dissimilar in outlook. Significantly, Paul disregarded both groups in two notable addresses.¹ It is idle to speak to those with whom there is no point of contact, no overlap of experience. Paul chose to speak rather to the Pharisees in Jerusalem, and to the Stoics of his Athenian audience. Those committed to Epicurus, or to what men had made of Epicurus, were not open to his argument.

Paul must have known much of Stoicism. Zeno, the founder of the school, came from Paul's corner of the Mediterranean, Citium in Cyprus. A second Zeno, who was head of the school in 204 B.C., actually came from Tarsus. He it was who gave Stoicism the practical turn which so attracted the intelligent Roman. Aratus, scientist and poet, who is quoted by Paul in the speech before the Areopagus, was a Stoic of the first vintage, born at Soli in Cilicia, and converted to Stoicism a few yards from where Paul spoke. Cleanthes, whose hymn to Zeus also uses the words of Paul's quotation, was a man of Assos in Asia Minor. As second head of the school, he infused a deeply religious element into Stoicism.

Zeno, first founder of the Stoic school and, it appears, a Semite, came to Athens about the year 320 B.C., at the very time when Epicurus was finding delight and relief in the atomic theory of Democritus in Colophon across the Aegean. Two questions confronted Zeno, as they confront all seekers after truth—what to believe, and how to live. Those questions have never been dissociated. It has already been shown how Epicurus answered them, and the heresy which emerged. Zeno's answers were more noble and exacting.

Nothing but goodness is good, he averred. Rank, riches, health, race, pleasure are incidentals. Epicurus might argue that pleasure is good, and find the bulk of the world to support him. But does history ever praise a man because he was happy, healthy, long-lived, or rich? No. What lives in memory is a man's goodness, virtue, heroism. The verdict of history is obviously groping after some form of ultimate justice. A man, therefore, if he realises, possesses all good in his person. What matters is what he is, not what he has or what happens to him. No earthly power can make a man bad outside his own will. It can rob him of freedom,

¹ Cf. Acts, xxiii. 6.

health, possessions but not of goodness. Why then fear, when, fundamentally, a man is free, safe, inviolate?

And what is goodness? A good day, a good knife, a good ship is one which fulfils its proper function well. A good man is one who fulfils his human function well. And what do we mean by 'well'? To answer this question Stoicism pointed to the conception of 'phusis', 'the process of growth' if one may hazard a translation. All things visible are moving to an end, a perfection, the seed towards the plant, the young to adulthood, the disorganised society towards the city-state. 'Phusis' is the force which promotes the process, a thrust, a drive towards the complete, the good. To live well, then, is to live 'according to "phusis"', in alliance, that is, and conformity with the great life force which pervades like a soul all Creation, making a 'cosmos', or an order out of it, and infusing it all with purpose.

From this concept emerged the Stoic conception of God, hardly a personal God, but not unlike the 'Ultimate Reality' imagined by some post-Christian theologians. It is pantheism in a broad sense, because if God is 'phusis', and 'phusis' cannot be understood or conceived apart from that which it indwells and interfuses, so God is Everything. The universe is a living whole, filled and animated by one soul. But if to live 'according to "phusis"' is to fulfil 'the will of God', how, the objection arises, can anyone do other than the will of God, if God is all? The Stoic avoided this Calvinist dilemma by answering that God is indeed in all, save in the doings of bad men, for man is free. Man's soul is part of the divine fire, and so partakes of the freedom of God Himself. Men can co-operate or rebel, though rebellion, in the nature of things, spells disaster. At this point a personal God is perilously near emerging, and no doubt in their human variety of religious experience many a Stoic thought of communion with God in deeply personal terms.

A way of life manifestly follows. The Labours of Hercules become a Stoic myth for the toilsome living of a servant of mankind. Stoic emperors like Trajan, Hadrian, and above all Marcus Aurelius, who toiled for the Empire, were practical exponents of this aspect of Stoicism. The other feature of Stoicism, its scorn of all earthly things apart from goodness, produced that taut defiance of the world, that tight-lipped endurance, and stubborn withdrawal which marked the Stoic opposition under the early Caesars, and which was a feature of Paul's contemporary Rome. In short Stoicism gave men armour in an evil day, and in days of good it urged them on. If its corruption was a philosophic Pharisaism, that was not the fault of the system.

It is easy to see why Paul addressed himself to the Stoics of his audience. He, too, believed in a purpose working to a vast consummation, and the need for man to co-operate with it.¹ He, too, believed that what a man was mattered supremely, and not what he possessed. He, too, sought self-sufficiency and superiority to circumstances.² His God, too, was, in Paul's view, transcendent, and beyond the patronage of man. There were points of sympathy and contact, a bridgehead of persuasion.

The address itself must now be considered. The approach was conciliatory and courteous, but perhaps just touched with that irony which was the common fashion of Athenian speech. 'Athenians', said Paul, 'I observe that in every way you are uncommonly religious.' Here was Athenian 'parrhesia' of the first order, tactful yet challenging, polite yet without sacrifice of the speaker's position. 'As I have moved about your city looking at the objects of your worship', Paul continued, 'I came upon an altar inscribed TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.' Thus it must be translated. In the Greek there is noun and adjective only, without either a definite or indefinite article. One or two examples of such inscription survive, but always in the plural, TO UNKNOWN GODS. In the plural, English can avoid a choice. In the singular, choice must be made between the definite and indefinite article. The definite is better, provided the reference and context of the inscription is realised. The inscription in each case refers to the unknown deity concerned with the altar's foundation, not generally or transcendently to a God vaguely realised and sought. Paul adapted the inscription for homiletic ends. He was not deceived about its meaning, but like any perceptive preacher sought an illustration and a point of contact in a known environment. The device captured attention and anchored the theme in experience.

What did the inscription mean? Plato preserves a tradition that Epimenides, the Cretan religious teacher and miracle-worker, was in Athens about 500 B.C. Some said it was 600 B.C., but dates are neither here nor there in a half-legendary situation. The story was that, to combat an epidemic, Epimenides directed the Athenians to loose sheep from Areopagus, and wherever they lay down to build an altar 'to the unknown god' of the place, and to make sacrifice. Perhaps the story is an aetiological myth, a tale invented to explain a visible phenomenon. Perhaps the altars merely represented a scrupulosity which, in a city full of deities from all the Eastern Mediterranean, sought to avoid offence to any in this slightly naïve fashion. It is impossible to say more:

¹ Rom. viii. 28; Eph. i. 9, 10.

² Phil. iv. 11, 12.

It was convenient, however, to Paul's approach, and simple for him to slide from the altar's dedication to the Stoic god who needed nothing from any man. Or was it quite the Stoic God? Not perhaps in the more austere significance of their belief. Paul's Creator was still his own personal God, the great Γ AM. Indeed he snatches a remembered phrase from a speech which had burned its memory on his brain. It was Stephen, on trial before the Sanhedrin, who had protested in Paul's hearing, that 'God does not dwell in temples made with hands'.

Stephen spoke of Solomon's shrine. Paul quoted the words under the great stone altar of Greece, the Acropolis. Whether he spoke on the traditional site, the lower outcrop of stone below the greater, called the Areopagus or the Hill of Ares, or whether the hearing took place in the Royal Porch in the agora, as others contend, the magnificence of the temples on the height was in full view, the glorious Parthenon, the Erechtheum, and the fairy-light little shrine of the Wingless Victory on its promontory beside the entrance portal. And wherever he deprecated the thought that deity could be set forth in 'gold, silver or stone, carved work of man's devising', the commanding statue of Athene Promachos lifted its bright-tipped spear above him, and the gold and ivory figure of the same Athene listened from the religious light of her sanctuary in the great temple.

Here, indeed, was a mingling of Hebrew notions of deity and Greek, with the Stoic listeners intent, recognising features of their own belief, but sensing something more personal, more urgently involved in the concept their visitor's words were weaving. It was a touch of the pleader's art to quote Cleanthes' hymn to Zeus. The passage runs as follows:

'Thou, Zeus, art praised above all the gods; many are thy names and thine is the power eternally. The origin of the world was from thee: and by law thou rulest over all things. Unto thee may all flesh speak, *for we are thy offspring*. Therefore will I raise a hymn unto thee: and will ever sing of thy might. The whole order of the heavens obeys thy word, as it moves round the earth, small and great luminaries commingled. How great thou art, King above all eternally. Nor is anything done on earth, apart from thee, nor in the firmament, nor in the seas, save that which the wicked do by their own folly. But thine is the skill to set even the crooked straight; what is without shape is shaped and the alien is akin before thee. Thou hast fitted together all things in one, the good and evil together, that thy word should be one in all things abiding eternally. Let folly be dispersed

from our souls, that we may repay the honour we have received of thee. Singing praise of thy works for ever as becometh the sons of men.'

Aratus of Soli, Paul's Cilician countryman, almost a contemporary of Cleanthes, had also used the words. Notice that Paul says 'poets'. This sage wrote a poem called *Phaenomena*, a dull piece, translated by Cicero, and in concept something like Thomson's *Seasons*. Its opening lines run:

'From Zeus let us begin; him do we mortals never leave un-named; full of Zeus are all the streets and all the market-places of men; full is the sea and the havens thereof; always we all have need of Zeus. *For we are also his offspring*; and he in his kindness unto men giveth favourable signs and wakeneth the people to work, reminding them of livelihood. He tells what time the soil is best for the labour of the ox and for the mattock, and what time the seasons are favourable both for the planting of trees and for casting all manner of seeds. For himself it was who set the signs in heaven, and marked out the constellations, and for the year devised what stars chiefly should give to men right signs of the seasons, to the end that all things might grow unfaillingly. Wherefore him do men ever worship first and last. Hail O Father, mighty marvel, mighty blessing unto men.'

The indefatigable tracers of quotation suggest that both Cleanthes and Aratus derived both theme and language from Epimenides, the Cretan already mentioned for his activities in Athens, and from whom Paul quoted an uncomplimentary line against the Cretans in his letter to Titus.¹ No one can be sure. What is significant is Paul's easy use of popular quotation.

Note that he was grappling with the thought of mankind's unity before God which had been his theme of bitter controversy with the Jews. It is a mark of the greatness of his mind that he could contest the same point in another context, in another framework of thought. It was the boast of the Athenians that they had 'sprung from the soil', and though men of Stoic colouring or conviction, like Seneca and Epictetus, had glimpsed the thought of mankind's unity, it was left to Paul, in two racial and religious settings, to give the concept lifting power and application.

Towards God, says Paul, mankind had ever 'groped'. The word he uses would raise echoes in every listening Greek. Homer and Plato were

¹ Titus i. 12.

familiar reading, and every educated man would remember that the verb is used in the *Odyssey*¹ to describe the blinded Cyclops groping for the entrance of his cave, and in the *Phaedo*,² Plato's most moving dialogue, for the very search for truth which Paul here envisages on its highest plane, the quest for God. The word, it is true, is used four times in the Septuagint³ to mean groping in the dark, but Paul must have had familiar Greek contexts in mind. His easy allusiveness is the impressive point.

So far, so good. With astonishing intellectual dexterity, the Jew of Tarsus, the Pharisee of Gamaliel's school, met the cream of Athens' intelligentsia on their familiar ground, discerned shrewdly the portion of the audience open to his argument, and with polished persuasion, in their common speech, put his concept of God before them. With fine audacity he swept the Acropolis of its divine significance, dismissing the magnificence of the grandest Greek art as irrelevant in the search for God. It is Athenian free speech at its boldest, exercised and also tolerated, for the broad-minded acceptance of Paul's argument is as remarkable as his courageous use of it. He spoke appropriately to time and place, and couched his message, as the Church is ever urged, and rightly urged to do, in the thought-forms of the day.

But where Paul's example parts company from the professed efforts of some theologians to follow it, is in the sequel. The message, in the process, must not lose content and tradition. There are those today who profess a search for an elusive God, greater and higher than 'the God of revelation', and who end bewildered with something not unlike the Stoic 'phusis', some ancient pantheism dressed in modern words, an impersonal or scarcely personal Force, created in the image of Tillich, Bultmann, and the Bishop of Woolwich. Paul made no such disastrous mistake, and sought no easy compromise. He met his audience where he could, sought by all means to graft his teaching on to accepted ideas, and to express it in acceptable and comprehensible terms. But he knew that a point of challenge had to come. It came with his introduction of Christ, and the divine authentication of His Person. In the act he lost bulk of his audience. The Epicureans had listened impatiently throughout. They were those who scoffed. The Stoics dismissed him with more polite formality. The true Stoic, the Wise Man of their famous concept, needed no repentance, feared no Day of Judgment, looked for no resurrection or reward.

¹ *Od.* 9. 416.

² *Phaedo.*, 99B.

³ *Deut.* xxviii. 29; *Job.* v. 14; *xii.* 25; *Isa.* lix. 10.

The psychology of such rejection is not far to seek. C. S. Lewis, in his trenchant fashion hits off well. 'We who defend Christianity', he writes, 'find ourselves constantly opposed not by the irreligion of our hearers, but by their real religion. Speak about beauty, truth, and goodness, or about a God who is simply the indwelling principle of these three, speak about a great spiritual force pervading all things, a common mind of which we are all parts, a pool of generalised spirituality to which we can all flow, and you will command friendly interest. But the temperature drops as soon as you mention a God who has purposes and performs particular actions, who does one thing and not another, a concrete, choosing, commanding, prohibiting God with a determinate character. People become embarrassed and angry.'¹

It was precisely such a concept which formed the climax of Paul's address, indeed inevitably formed that climax for he was preaching Christianity as a final revelation, and Christ as God's full exegesis,² a fact forgotten by episcopal and theological proponents of a dechristianised Christianity today. The reaction under the Acropolis was exactly as Lewis describes it in the modern context.

Lewis concludes his chapter: 'An impersonal God—well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth and goodness, inside our own heads—better still. A formless life force surging through us, a vast power which we can tap—best of all. But God Himself, alive, pulling at the other end of the end of the cord . . . that is quite another matter. . . . There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion ('Man's search for God'!) suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found Him? . . . Worse still, supposing He had found us? So it is a sort of Rubicon. One goes across; or not.'

The audience dispersed. If the function of the Areopagus was the informal or formal investigation of new teachings, they no doubt regarded their function as fulfilled. The newcomer had nothing pernicious to disseminate, only the stock-in-trade of the religious enthusiast the world over, and Athens could absorb such trivialities and survive. One member only of the court crossed the Rubicon, and some of the bystanders, for there was no doubt a listening circle. There normally was on such occasions. Round the Acropolis in modern Athens runs the Street of Dionysius the Areopagite. Paul's convert would have been amazed.

A question of some importance remains. From Athens Paul moved on to Corinth, the cosmopolitan city of two seas. Writing some four

¹ *Miracles*, ch. xi.

² i Cor. ii. 2.

years later to the contentious church which he founded there, he remarked upon the studied simplicity of the gospel he had preached among them. Are those right who see in this attitude a repudiation of the intellectual approach which marked the Areopagus address? By no means, even if it be correctly assumed that the argument before the philosophers was commonly pursued in the agora, a reasonable assumption if the sermon at Lystra¹ is evidence. There, too, Paul had a Gentile audience, unversed in Judaism or Old Testament imagery.

The remark to the Corinthians must be seen in the context of the restrained irony which characterises the first four chapters of the epistle. With the shallow intellectualism of the Corinthians, Paul was disposed to waste no time. He was not prepared to give them a Christianity diluted with their pseudo-philosophical ideas, or necessarily expressed in their attenuated terminology. Nor had he been prepared to do that in Athens, as the final confrontation of his address amply demonstrates. His talk was not a failure. Dionysius was a triumph, which any intellectual of Christian conviction might envy among his peers. The whole address remains a model for those who seek in such circles to present the Christian faith, and a warning to those who, in misguided moments, have seen a virtue in crudity, and a loyalty to truth in a disrespect for the views, the habits of thought, and the attitudes of intelligent people who fail in all points to follow them. Confrontation there must be, if the popular word may be used again, but with preamble of courtesy, with the tolerance which is not incompatible with earnestness, and with the sincerest of efforts to see good where good has found a place. But what Paul was to call 'the offence of the cross' remains.

In conclusion a word about the narrator, the physician friend of Paul. The apostle himself had a way of moving to the centre of the stage. Even on the plunging, disabled galley driving into the Malta surf, he emerged in moral control of the situation. In Athens he stands out sharp and clear in three hundred and seventy words of terse narrative, dismissing the Parthenon with a wide sweep of his hand, standing a little stern and sad as both schools streamed away. That picture lies in the word about Dionysius and the few who 'clave to him'. He is an impressive figure, as apt to hold the attention in the record as in real life.

But his friend deserves notice. There are those who owe all to a friendship. In a shady graveyard behind a New Plymouth church there is a mossy stone inscribed 'Charles Armitage Brown, the Friend of

¹ Acts, xiv. 15-17.

Keats'. The pioneer who had known the English poet claimed no other fame. None who had known of Atticus save that he was the friend of Cicero, few of Boswell without Johnson, and what would the fishers of Galilee have been but for Christ who found them? So too with Luke. A friendship, formed first in Troas or Philippi, brought his worth and genius to life.

Luke was a writer of latent power. The poetry of the opening chapters of his Gospel, the unforgettable narratives like that of the Emmaus walk, and the riot in Ephesus, could stand in any anthology of Greek literature. So too with the narrative which has occupied this hour. The speech itself on the bronze plaque pinned to the rock in Athens today contains 193 Greek words. In such brevity Luke gave the sense and feeling of an historic oration, the pattern of its argument, its allusive language and quotation. He caught the spirit of its persuasiveness, and marked the uncompromising nature of its challenge. He made it possible to enter into the hopes and endeavour of the speaker, and to understand the mood of those who listened.

What is inspiration in the sense in which theologians use it? Is it not that state in which loyalty, a faith, a deep conviction so dominates and possesses a personality, that God who is the object of its dedication can infuse the living mind, sharpen thought, and bring to strength, coherence, and expression those powers which might otherwise lack words, unity, or beneficent release? In such mood Luke took Paul's notes, listened in the barrack-cell at Caesarea to all Paul had to say, and wrote down in vigorous and simple language the page of history which we have read. It is fitting we should close with such tribute to the good physician. Of such sort was the other man of medicine and healing whose character and testimony we commemorate in this address—Professor A. Rendle Short.