

Easter 6A

Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66:7-18; 1Pet 3:13-22; John 14:15-21

During the Coronavirus epidemic I have been struck by how the limitations we now live under have led me to read Scripture in a new light. While the state sanctioned rules have not been overly onerous to churches, they have not been benign either. Witness how it took a few weeks before churches were accorded essential status.

In the earliest years of Christianity, Christians were viewed warily by both Roman and Jewish authorities. Romans and Jews both agreed that Caesar was supreme. The Jews may have believed it grudgingly, but they believed it all the same. That was one of the factors that led to the crucifixion. You may recall that when Pilate offered to set Jesus free, the authorities reminded him that Jesus had said he was a king and they shouted ‘we have no king but Caesar’. That was enough to change Pilate’s mind lest he be accused of usurping Caesar’s authority.

In fact, for a few generations, a movement had begun to revere Caesar as a deity. Caesar was not only a human ruler; he was also part god. Thus, the early hymn, ‘Jesus is Lord’ was almost seditious in nature as it called into question whether Caesar was truly Lord. The multitude of gods and goddesses, both Roman and Greek, did not run afoul of this as Caesar was not supplanted by any of them.

The Jews had been given a kind of carve-out for their beliefs. Because the Jews had been in existence longer than the Greek or Roman empires, they were what we might call grandfathered. They were allowed to worship the one, true God of their religion but only if they kept it within their own segregated communities and did not try to upset or infiltrate secular society. It was a very tenuous agreement as only two centuries before, Jewish rebels had led a revolt against the empire that is recorded in the books of Maccabees. The gospel of John records this. ⁴⁹ *But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all!"* ⁵⁰

You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed."¹ Caiaphas could not have known that within a generation, that would actually come to pass as the Temple was destroyed in 70 A.D. and the Jews in Jerusalem were driven out by the Romans in retaliation for another revolt.

The environment that Paul found himself in at the Areopagus then was this rich mix of Roman and Greek gods and goddesses that over the centuries had been accepted as legitimate and belief in the God of Israel that was tolerated. Here, Paul appealed to the Roman and Greek sensibilities of using reason and rhetoric to make his case for the God of Israel and obliquely to Jesus Christ. Paul is attempting to lay the groundwork for a new religion. One that has its roots in the God of Israel but now incorporates the new thing God has done, that is, entering the world as a human being and defeating the powers of sin and death like no other Greek or Roman god can dream of doing.

This is an astonishing claim and one that is surely going to antagonize both the secular government authorities and the Jewish religious leaders. If Jesus is Lord, then what is Caesar? If Jesus is the Son of God what does that mean for the Jewish religion? Neither of those belief systems can stand as is given this new revelation.

Earlier, Paul himself had led persecutions against Christians as a zealous Pharisee and we saw last Sunday how he had been complicit in the death of Stephen. The secular government had turned a blind eye to that as it only involved the segregated Jewish community. Later, when we get to the time of Peter's letter, there is now a kind of unofficial and low level prejudice against Christians in secular society.

I think we are finding ourselves closer to this kind of mentality than any of us have seen. I'm not saying Christians are being persecuted because we only need to look at other countries to know what real persecution is. But I

¹ John 11:49-50

am saying that Christianity no longer has the favor in the culture that it once held. I believe that if a lockdown like we are experiencing now had happened a generation ago, churches would have been accorded essential status from the beginning. Now, religious belief has been removed from the public sphere. Religious belief must remain a private affair, between a person and their god.

Many have argued that there must be a separation between Church and State, but a close reading of the 1st Amendment only limits the reach of the government, not the Church.

I want to be clear – I am not stating that Christians are under persecution here. But I am seeing religion being viewed in a less favorable light than it was accorded even a short time ago. For this reason, I am reading Scripture with a new perspective. May that be at least one positive thing that comes out of this pandemic. Amen