

For the reader: Areopagus is pronounced: (*Air- ēē –op - uh – gus.*)

Convention Evening Homily for reading in parishes on 3 Epiphany

The Rt. Rev. Mark Bourlakas

Begin reading here:

The following is the homily Bishop Mark preached to our Annual Convention this past Friday at Evening Prayer. It was the Eve of the Conversion St. Paul, Apostle. The lesson was from Paul's letter to the Colossians

Unlike many of the saints and religious people whose day of remembrance in our liturgical calendar is quite often celebrated on the day they died, St. Paul's is, aptly, a day in the season of Epiphany that marks his conversion and which begins his evangelism of the Gentiles.

Paul's past life is thrown to the ground and his eyes are opened to a new way. Apprehended by the Risen Christ, he turns from an angry and self-righteous persecutor to the most prolific evangelist of God's grace and love.

Paul got up from the Damascus road and went straight on to tell Jesus' story to my ancestors the Greeks. And many of them were actually open to Paul's proclamation. The Holy Spirit was going to do a new thing with Paul. Suspect Gentiles would now be incorporated into God's unfolding plan of salvation.

I finally made it to Greece this past summer. On our second morning in Athens, a morning where the temperature was already in the 80's, we stood with our guide in the shade of a grove of olive trees at the foot of the Acropolis. Way up there were the temples built for Athena and Poseidon.

While our guide was orienting us to the entire surroundings of the Acropolis and my girls were already looking exhausted by the heat, I was staring at a tall outcropping of rugged pinkish rock with rough hewn stairs cut into its side. I knew from pictures that is was the Areopagus.

In classical times the Areopagus functioned as a kind of court for those who had murdered or severely wounded another person.

Greek mythology has it that the god Ares was tried there by the other gods for the murder of Poseidon's son. This stone outcropping was also a place where religious matters could be heard and adjudicated.

So this was the place where some curious Athenian philosophers invited Paul to tell his story of the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus.

With the sun and its heat on the rise, my daughters, Sarah and Elizabeth, were eager to get on up to the Parthenon, but I had already let the guide know that we wanted to climb the Areopagus first. This was the early part of the trip where our girls were still willing to indulge what would be my many religious side trips.

At the foot of the Areopagus is an winding access ramp for an easy ascent to the top. But there is also the ancient, irregular and rather slippery steps that Paul would've used. That's the way I was going up. Martha and Elizabeth took the ramp. Sarah, still up for an adventure, followed me up the steps.

The view from the top is an incredible panoramic view of the ancient Agora. You can see all the way to the port of Athens where Paul would've most likely arrived by boat on one or more of his missionary journeys. You can track that walking distance and the ruins along the way. Down there, somewhere, is where Paul saw the altar with the inscription, **To an Unknown God**, that he would make use of in his proclamation to the Athenians.

In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke tells us that as Paul debated with some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, some of them said of him, *“What does this babbling have to say?”*

“So they took him to the Areopagus. There, Luke tells us, they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us and so we would like to know what it means.” They are inquiring. They really want to know.

And so, filled with the courage and conviction of the Holy Spirit, Paul proclaims the good news of Jesus and his resurrection from the dead to those who are curious enough to listen.

At the base of the Aeropagus, embedded in the rock, is a large tablet of black marble with Paul's words to the Athenians inscribed in Greek.

While I cannot really put into words what it meant for me to stand and pray on top of this place where Paul's mission to the Greek people began, I tell you about experiencing the Areopagus because, aside from the tremendous view and the marble plaque quoting Paul's words from Acts, the place is rather unremarkable.

The wonderful art and architecture of the temples of ancient Greece are all at the top of the Acropolis. That was where everyone, including us, was headed. They are the attraction.

But it was right there, on that unremarkable pile of rock that one person shared his story of how his life was being transformed by knowing Jesus. And that story was met by willing listeners who were eager for good news.

They were captivated by that shared moment with Paul and began to live their lives in new ways. And later they, themselves, would go out and share their stories.

And so, under the prayed for power of the Holy Spirit, the new church took root and grew in the Greek cities and towns where Paul proclaimed the Gospel. People who desired a new start were baptized into Christ and entered into a new way of knowing God and their neighbors.

This seemingly unremarkable act of sharing our stories of knowing Jesus and listening to others respond with the stories of their journey and faith is the heart of the life changing discipleship that we have been baptized and called into.

In the letters he wrote to these faithful communities, Paul sought to encourage and ensure them of God's great love and mercy. He gave thanks for their faithfulness. And, from time to time, he also had to urge them into going out and spreading this good news of the Risen Christ.

The first thing Paul writes in the opening of his letter to the Colossians is *“In our prayers for you we always thank God, ... for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints.”* Our continual prayers for each other and for our faith communities is essential to our common mission. We practice love and care within our parishes so that we might extend the same to our neighbors. Love begins at home.

I continually pray for all you, for our parishes, and our forward mission, as a diocese, in Jesus’ name. Our staff begins every week with Morning Prayer where we pray for our parishes and their needs, be it a search process, a new ministry, or any number of particular challenges. We pray for all in leadership as they participate in ministries, committees and boards around our diocese.

We pray especially for everyone commended to all of the prayer lists around our diocese. And each week pray for and remember the ordinations, birthdays, and anniversaries of all of our clergy.

And I send them a card each time letting them know that they have been prayed for.)

Every Sunday when you pray for the parish where I am celebrating and preaching, it is not just a way to keep track of where I am. It is a prayerful reminder of our connectedness in Jesus. On almost every Sunday, Episcopalians around our beautiful diocese are being baptized, confirmed and received into our Gospel fellowship. Others are reaffirming their commitments as Jesus' disciples. In all of this, we remind ourselves that we are not separate and out there on our own, but that we are one in Christ. We need each other's prayers and support.

We should always be praying deeply for the children, teenagers and newly arrived members in our parishes who are being baptized, confirmed and received. They need our prayers as they grow up in a culture of distraction and division.

One of marks of the faithfulness of those first communities of Christians that Paul founded was their prayer lives. They prayed for each other locally and they prayed for the other churches where the Gospel was being received. We are called to do the same. In our baptismal covenant we promise to *“continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers.”*

The other matter that Paul wrote of in those opening lines of his letter to the Colossians, as he also did with the other communities he had founded, concerned their fruitfulness. Fruitfulness was a constant theme for Paul in his coaching of these new churches.

Paul writes to them: *“We have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may ... bear fruit in every good work.”*

Paul speaks of bearing fruit in the way that Jesus did all the time. Jesus taught, *“You will know them by their fruits.”*

“And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.”

And so as the baptized disciples of the Risen Christ, our table fellowship equips us to seek out and to follow the unfolding work of the Holy Spirit in lives of our neighbors. This is another promise of our baptismal covenant:

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ? And Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

These are the active promises of all of us who have been baptized into Christ's body the Church. We come together in this Convention, and weekly in all of our parishes, in order encourage and pray with each other and, also, to strengthen our resolve to go back out into the world to be a blessing to our neighbors by proclaiming the good words of the hope, love and reconciliation that we have come to know in Christ Jesus.

So as we embark on the next 100 years of missional activity in this great diocese, let us pray that the Holy Spirit will, indeed, fill us with the wisdom and grace to both give and receive good fruit in Jesus' name.

AMEN