

Relating to Creation
-1/5-

"God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him..." (Acts 17:27)

One of the things that distinguishes man from all other forms of life on this earth is that he is always looking for meaning in life. You see it in very small children as they begin to explore this strange new world into which they have been born - the rattle is rattled, unknown objects put in the mouth. Then as they learn to speak that word "why" and the myriad of questions that seem to defy answers.

This quest for meaning has stirred scientists through all ages as they have looked upon the wonders of this world in which we live and have sought to understand the workings of nature. Of course over the years this understanding of nature has been harnessed by man's inventiveness, starting with primitive weapons and tools to aid him in hunting and agriculture, the inventions of machines and all the electronic gadgetry of our day. All products of man seeking to understand the world in which he finds himself.

But it does not stop there. Man is conscious of his existence. We are conscious of something greater than ourselves. Even the most primitive communities of men have sought to relate to this, conscious of something, someone in the spiritual realm on whom they depend for their very existence. One particular race of men, the Jewish people, came to a particular awareness of God as the origin of man and the world in which he lives. Not just God as a power but God as a person who desired to enter into a close relationship with man. The Scriptures of our Old Testament witness to a people responding to this revelation of God. We find them marvelling that the God who created

the heavens and the earth should concern himself with the affairs of sinful man.

Paul, in his address to the citizens of Athens, that we read from in our lesson from the Acts of the Apostles is talking to people who were aware of a greater power. They understood that power in terms of a variety of gods and goddesses. Much Greek speculation was taken up with sorting out the relationships between them. They were aware that they had n't got the whole answer and so, to be on the safe side, they erected a monument to the "unknown god". Paul latched onto this and told them that the god they did not know was in fact the God who made heave and earth, who guided the destinies of nations, where they should live. "God di this," Paul insisted, so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him." (Acts 17:27)

As we have already recognised there is something in man that seeks to reach out and understand the meaning of life. Of course we can do this on a number of levels. It can take the form of simple speculation, chewing over ideas. The philosophers of the Middle Ages were famous for this. Apparently a great deal of mental energy was expended on the question of how many angels could stand on the point of a needle. The sort of question that draws from most of us the simple retort, "So what?" The answer, even if we could find it, doesn't have any bearing on life or my relationship with God.

So while it is natural for us to seek there comes a point where we need to be committed to our search. So Paul tells the Greeks, "God intends them to seek and perhaps reach out for him." The word he used for "to reach out for", *haptai*, means literally to feel or grope after, as someone in the dark. It speaks to me of search at a deeper level,

speaks to me of coming to grips with real questions, real issues. What does God require of me in my life of service, what does God desire to do for me and in me in drawing me into a closer fellowship with him? It involves getting to grips with aspects of my life that separate me from God. It leads me inescapably to a recognition that of myself, of my own power, my own will I will fall short of God's perfect will for me. This is not so much a confession of abject failure as a recognition of truth: that we can only please God to the extent we learn to depend on God for strength to do his will and a trust in what he has done for us in Christ in revealing himself to us and in redeeming us.

God does not force himself upon us. We need to actually want to go further in our search of God. But we are promised that if we make this earnest, honest search then God himself will meet us on the way. Jesus promises us "Ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks the door will be opened." (Matt 7:7,8).

This was the appeal Paul made to the citizens of Athens. To move beyond their speculation and their satisfaction with lesser gods who were no gods to an honest, deeper search for truth that they would find in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Many were not prepared to but some followed and believed and asked Paul to tell them more.

This is a appeal made to us all, to see in the teachings of Jesus not just nice ideas, not just a man we can admire but one who will lead us into a deeper knowledge of ourselves as we are and what we are called to be in Christ. This is something to be sought not in theory, in an

abstract 'chewing over' of ideas but in the actualities of life. This is at the root of the challenge facing us in our own Province. As I have said before there is a great deal of fear, of suspicion and mistrust. I am becoming more and more convinced that as Christians, in the midst of our fear and suspicions we have to search deep in our hearts at to what God is wanting to say and do in and through the life of his Church at this time.

There has arisen in recent years a group known as ECONI, or to give it its full name, Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland. They have in a number of publications and conferences sought to apply biblical principles to the divided community in Northern Ireland. They are convinced that all political thought and action must be tested by biblical values. Maybe in the past we have looked at the Bible through the spectacles of our politics rather than our politics through the spectacles of our bibles.

In the few minutes remaining I just want to share with you some insights from their most recent publication, "A Future With Hope."

Probably one of the hardest messages for us to hear is that of reconciliation. The writers of this document go straight to the nub of the issue:-

The root cause of the conflict in this community is the division that exists in the hearts and minds of its people. While this manifests itself in questions of politics and partition, identity and culture, the fundamental gulf concerns the relationship among our people. These relationships have been deeply marred by violence and murder, death and destruction. While there is legitimate hurt, pain and anger as a result, there also lurks bitterness, vengeance and the desire to triumph.

The bible clearly teaches that such breakdown in relationships and the bitter divisions that exist, are the outworking of our sinful nature. As such, the problem of our division is essentially a spiritual one and requires a deep work of God's spirit in our community to bring about the transformation of relationships that is required. The Christian good news is a message of grace and mercy, forgiveness and healing. The strength to forgive and start out on the long road to healing does not lie in ourselves but in the life and work of Jesus."

Later on they continue:-

"Reconciliation means the restoration of a good relationship between enemies. For the Christian, its primary meaning relates to how this good relationship is achieved in the confrontation between ourselves and God. In the death of Jesus, God removed the factors which produced our estrangement and alienation from him. It is God who takes the initiative and reconciles us to himself, restoring the relationship that we have broken. This pattern of reconciliation is the calling of all who follow Christ. Jesus expects his disciples to be the initiators of reconciliation, even with those who we believe have wronged us. Those who have been forgiven must seek to be forgiving. Without this release of forgiveness in the community, there can be no healing.

However we must recognise that many of the factors which lead to our estrangement and alienation from each other will always be with us. Wrong has been done and the hurt on both sides of our divide will remain for a long time. There will be ideological differences between Unionist and Nationalist. Profound theological differences between Protestantism and Catholicism. It must mean that our relationships are no longer marked by fear, suspicion and hostility. There is a particular responsibility placed upon Christians who believe that in Christ God

has broken down the dividing wall of hostility which separated us from him and from each other."

They conclude:-

At this time the world is watching Northern Ireland. For many years our strife has been perceived, rightly or wrongly, as an offence to the Christian cause. Whatever created the negativity and mistrust, misunderstanding and malevolence of our conflict, Christians must now be a people of the future, where trust, understanding and goodwill are evident for all to see. We do this, not just for ourselves, but for the glory of God and for the sake of the generations to come."

As I was saying last week as I was reflecting on our memories of the end of the war in Japan and as we come to the first anniversary of the ceasefires in Northern Ireland, there are many with very painful memories of what has happened. I was particularly struck by one veteran who honestly and openly said when asked as to whether he could forgive. He said "No, I can't. I'm not particularly proud of that - but at the moment I can't." We have to respect the honesty and sincerity of that. But for those of us who have not been directly scarred by the events of the past, particularly those of us who are followers of Christ, groups such as ECONI challenge us to enter into that honest, deeper search for truth that we find in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ that Paul enjoined on the citizens of Athens. That we would take Christ at his word; "Ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks the door will be opened." (Matt 7:7,8).