

28 May 2025

## ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

### “Paul in Athens”

Acts 17:16.22-31

*Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. So Paul, standing in the middle of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything. And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each one of us, for ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your poets have said, ‘For we are indeed his offspring.’ Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead.”*

After the Lord had loosed the apostles' chains by a mighty sign, which even caused the jailer to embrace the faith together with his whole family, the praetors of Philippi wanted to set them free (Acts 16:35). However, Paul insisted that they come themselves and reproached them for having publicly scourged them without previous condemnation, even though they were Roman citizens (v. 37). When the praetors heard this, they were frightened, ‘and begged them to leave the city’ (v. 39).

In Thessalonica and Berea, where Paul and Silas went next, their announcement met with a reception similar to that in the other cities. On the one hand, they found open hearts that listened to them willingly, including women of the nobility (Acts 17:4), and

not a few believed, both Jews and Greeks. On the other hand, it was again the envious Jews who tried to prevent the spread of the faith, proceeding in the same way as in the other places (v. 5). They incited the inhabitants of the city, especially the authorities, so that the apostles had to flee again. In his last flight from Berea, Paul was taken alone to Athens, while he instructed his companions that Timothy and Silas should catch up with him as soon as possible (v. 15).

Seeing the idols that filled the city of Athens, Paul was consumed with anger, as today's passage tells us. It should be borne in mind that from ancient times the Jews had been strictly commanded by the Lord to turn away from all idols, which are an offence to the one God and whose worship constitutes a violation of the first commandment. Therefore, we can speak of a "holy anger" that came over Paul, similar to that which filled Jesus when He saw how His Father's house had been turned into a "den of robbers" (Mt 21:13).

Paul had already begun to preach in the synagogue in Athens and was also arguing with some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers (Acts 17:17-18). They took him to the Areopagus, where many people always came to hear the latest news. Today's story offers us a very astute speech by Paul. Having restrained his anger at the sight of so many idols, he used what he had seen in that city as a "springboard" for his proclamation. Earlier he had honoured the religiosity of the Athenians, noting their good intentions even though they were still trapped in idolatry, in order to bring them to the knowledge of the true God.

In this discourse, the Apostle to the Gentiles gives us a good example of how to deal with similar situations. Pastoral care and concern for how to reach people must be preceded by the objective truth, which can never be omitted: what they worship are idols. But, once this reality is clear, a point of engagement can be sought in their religious beliefs, however erroneous or imperfect, in order to proclaim the Gospel to them from there. Paul does this in an exemplary way when he mentions the altar 'to the unknown God', which he uses to announce to the Athenians the God they worshipped without knowing. He also quotes one of their poets in his speech: *"In him we live and move and exist, as some of your poets have said, 'For we are also of his offspring'"*.

Thus Paul makes them understand that God cannot simply be the product of art and human ingenuity, and begins to speak to them of the Man who will judge the world

and whom God raised from the dead. The account of the Acts of the Apostles in Athens ends like this:

*“Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked; but others said, “We will hear you again about this.” So Paul went out from among them. But some men joined him and believed, among them Dionys'ius the Are-op'agite and a woman named Dam'aris and others with them.” (Acts17:32-34).*

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**Meditation on the day's Gospel:** <https://en.elijamission.net/prayer-to-the-holy-spirit/>