

The Bishop of Sheffield's Annual Lecture
'Commending Christ: Apologetics in a Sceptical Culture'
Acts 17.16-34: Jesus and Anastasis?

Introduction:

Sisters and brothers, thank you once again for your commitment to today. I want to build on what Justin has said so ably this morning, by turning with you to the Bible. I was half afraid many of you would drift off at lunch time, and now I'm not sure if I would've been relieved or disappointed if you had done. Many of you will by now have begun to realise that your new bishop is something of a one-trick pony, and that the Bible is that one-thing I do. So brownie points to those of you who have brought a copy of Holy Scripture with you, whether it's a hard copy or an electronic version. If you have a Bible, you might like to turn to Acts chapter 17, verses 16 to 34. And if you don't have a Bible, you don't get away with it so easily: the text will appear on the screen in a moment or two!

The passage concerned is Luke's account of the sermon the Apostle Paul preached at the Areopagus in Athens and of the events which led up to it. And I have chosen it for exploration with you this evening because I find this passage of Scripture exceptionally challenging. It may be true that Paul's Athens is a far cry from our communities – I don't suppose even it's most loyal fan would claim that even this University city is a major international intellectual and cultural centre! But that's what Athens was of course: the first century intellectual and cultural capital of the entire Mediterranean. Ancient Athens was noted for its religious devotion; modern Barnsley is not. In first century Athens, the Christian Gospel was a complete novelty; in twenty-first century

Conisbrough, a Christian place of worship is the oldest building in the town. Yet the way in which St Paul went about his preaching in a situation which was culturally foreign to him has lessons to teach us which can be applied straightforwardly and profitably to situations like the ones we face in our communities, today. And what I want to do for the next forty minutes or so is to explore his approach with you, by looking closely at the content of his sermon, as Luke reports it. I am convinced it models for us an approach to evangelistic preaching which we would do well to adopt more widely today. I am convinced it models a way of presenting the Gospel to a sceptical audience which is contextual, attentive and adventurous and in the light of which much of our own evangelism is shown to be flat, lazy and defensive.

Here's a reminder of the context, first of all. On his second missionary journey, on which he was accompanied by Timothy and Silas, St Paul has been driven out of first Thessalonica and then Bereoa by Jewish opponents in the province of Macedonia, as a result of which he fled; and although it seems he never had any intention of visiting the city, he found himself not just in Athens, but alone there. And we pick up the story as he waits for his companions, who were to follow on at their earliest convenience. We will look first at verses 16 to 21, in which Luke tells us what Athens was like; and then at verses 22 to 31, in which we are given an account of Paul's preaching, and finally at verses 32 to 34, in which Luke reports the outcome. I want to break up my lecture by making space for the Bible reading itself in those three sections, starting with verses 16 to 21. The translation is the NRSV, which is occasionally heavy going, but has the advantage on an occasion like this, of sticking quite closely to the

original greek without ever, as far as I can tell, being obviously theologically tendentious:

1. The City of Athens (verses 16 to 21):

¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.

¹⁸ Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, 'What does this babbler want to say?' Others said, 'He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.' (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.)

¹⁹ So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰ It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.' ²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

First of all then, let me say a bit more about first century Athens. It really was a prestigious place. It was the sophisticated city of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, the home of 2 great ancient philosophies, Stoicism and Epicureanism — about which more in a moment; it boasted two magnificent pieces of architecture: the Parthenon and the Areopagus. It may be true to some extent

that its glory days were already behind it, and that by the time Paul got there it was living on the reputation of its past, but in the first century mediterranean world it could still claim to be **the** great centre of learning and civilisation – in 49AD it probably still qualified to be the European Capital of Culture. It was a major university town, with professors and students, and the cradle of democracy. If Rome was the heart of its Empire, Athens could still claim to be the brain.

So you can imagine how fascinating it must have been an intellectual and culture vulture like Paul to visit it. But what a let down he found it. Luke tells us that what Paul saw, what impressed him most, wasn't the brilliance or the beauty of the place – but the idolatry. The city was full of idols: no doubt of Athena herself; but also of Jupiter, Venus, Mercury, Neptune, Hermes and Diana. And these idols would have been carved not in wood only, but in marble, ivory, silver and gold by the finest sculptors and metalsmiths. And the sight didn't just disappoint Paul. It distressed him. Even that's worth pausing over. How often, I wonder, can we honestly say, that our evangelism is motivated by a genuinely compassionate sense of distress.

In Paul's case, his distress caused him to abandon the role of tourist and to abandon his plan to wait for the arrival of his companions before embarking on a mission. So he set to preaching. It's worth noting that Paul's reaction wasn't negative only. His horror and indignation didn't cause him to retreat or to withdraw, in other words, but to engage with the people around him.

He started arguing with the Jews and Gentile God-fearers in the synagogue – as he had previously done in Thessalonica and Bereoa; as indeed it had become his normal practice to do. But here in Athens, he also started

debating every day in the *agora*, the market place, with local philosophers and public orators. The agora was the place where outdoor university lectures took place and public debates.

There is no exact equivalent to this that I can think of in our own culture, where people gather to discuss philosophy, ethics, politics and faith. If that kind of debate happens, in my experience it develops spontaneously, as often as not over a meal at home, or maybe down the pub – but not with strangers really and not predictably, routinely. We live in a much more individualistic culture than Paul did, and one has privatised morality and values, so that we don't speak openly, publicly about such things – except of course online; but then seldom in a nuanced way: online debates seem to me to degenerate into shouting matches even more quickly than face to face ones; and that presents new challenges for evangelism.

In verse 18, Luke focusses on Paul's confrontation with the two most influential groups of philosophers: the Stoics and the Epicureans. Now we are apt to be misled by the term 'philosophers'. It has narrowly academic connotations for us which it did not have in the first century. If Stoicism and Epicureanism were not religions exactly, they were certainly creeds or world-views, with moral, ethical and religious implications. They were also rival and contemporaneous movements: Stoicism (which was founded by a man called Zeno, who died in 275 BC) conceived of a god so immanent – so near to us and close to us, surrounding us – that Stoics were almost pantheist (they almost saw god as to be worshiped in creation; they believed that god was to the world, if you like, what the soul is to the body). Epicureanism on the other hand (which was founded by a man called Epicurus, who died in 270 BC) regarded the gods

as so transcendent – so far from us and distant – that they were almost atheists. Epicureans felt that the gods had no interest in us and no influence on human affairs.

The Stoics placed great stress on the life-principle, the breath, and on the immortality of the soul. They believed that each nation had its own destiny and responsibility. But it was a fatalist movement, encouraging duty, resignation to pain, and submission to fate. The Epicureans by contrast emphasised pleasure – not necessarily of a sensual kind – and the pursuit of individual happiness. They believed we are created to live free of fear, and should aspire to rise above the turmoil of our passions and as far as possible, above pain. They believed in the self-sufficiency of the gods, but not in any after-life for humanity, nor any judgment. Now we'll come back to some of those views later.

Luke says that when the people heard Paul, some of them called him 'a babbler'. That's a very weak translation. The Greek word is *spermologos*, which means 'a seed-picker', one who pecks up the pips of the current teachings without digesting them, like a chicken in the market square, and then tries to win a reputation for himself by preaching his peckings. We might say, 'You parrot', or 'You magpie' – or even 'you gutter-snipe': plundering bits and pieces of teaching from others and attempting to pass it off as your own. The implication is that when people heard Paul, they recognised a bit of Stoicism here and a bit of Epicureanism there. At one level, lots of what Paul was saying seemed quite familiar to them. But on the other hand, something about his message was new: he spoke so repeatedly of Jesus and the Resurrection, in Greek that's five words (*to Iesous kai tē Anastasis*), that they took him to be speaking about foreign divinities, or dieties, plural in verse 18): and since

Anastasis is a feminine noun in Greek, it sounded to them like Paul was preaching about Jesus and his consort, his girlfriend, Resurrection.

Now, that meant potential trouble. The philosopher Socrates himself, no less, had been condemned to death in Athens on precisely the same charge 450 years before: for introducing foreign divinities.

So there's a bit of an edge to verses 19 and 20. It's true that Luke is mocking the Athenians in verse 21, for the superficial way they used to get their kicks out of debating anything new. But there's a degree of aggression and hostility in verses 19 and 20: they took him and *dragged* him to the Areopagus and said, 'Tell us what this new teaching is'. In other words, he's not just being given a platform to preach here. The Areopagus was a formal judgment hall and Paul was being offered a chance to defend himself, as much as a chance to evangelise them. But it's all the same to him. It's an opportunity he intends to grasp in both hands.

2. Paul's sermon (verses 22 to 31)

And that brings us, secondly, to the content of Paul's sermon in verses 22 to 31.

It goes without saying that this is Luke's summary of Paul's sermon rather than a word for word report. It has to be: reading verses 22 to 31 takes barely two minutes, and there's no way on earth that, when Paul is eventually given the floor and the opportunity to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus in this centre of the ancient world, he spoke for as short a time as that. No way at all. It was, you might say, the most important set piece of his life.

So it's a summary of Paul's sermon. It's presumably Luke's recollection of what Paul said Paul said – since Luke wasn't there on the day. Plus, it's Luke's recollection of what Paul said Paul said, now edited for Luke's own purposes – just as Mark, Matthew, Luke and John, when they quote Jesus aren't just giving us their recollection of the Lord's teaching: but their recollection, skilfully arranged, edited, spun you almost say, in order to drive home the particular 'take' they have on Jesus which they are trying to convey. Luke has a Gospel agenda, a message he's trying to get over, and inevitably he furthers this goal by the way he presents Paul's sermon.

But having said that, there's no reason to suppose this isn't a faithful presentation of Paul's preaching. Why wouldn't it be? Luke was a fan of Paul's. He had no reason to misrepresent him.

And whether it reflects Paul or Luke, there's one other point to note: in the original Greek, the speech is extremely alliterative: it's full of words and syllables beginning with 'p'. I've counted 34 in the ten verses. Bear in mind that the Greek words all/every and human and make/made each have a P in them and you can probably see, even in an English translation, how the sounds mount up. Either Paul or Luke (or, for my money, more likely both) took as much care in crafting the sound of this sermon as they did with its substance. I suspect most of us, most preachers, most evangelists today are much more casual in the way we do it – to our cost.

So let's just go back to verse 18 for a second. It's no surprise that the people of Athens found the Gospel message novel. In the first century it was new to everyone. So the fact that they took Paul for a 'seed-picker' is quite surprising. It must mean that he so clothed the message of the Gospel in the

language and even concepts of his hearers that much of what Paul was saying sounded familiar to them. Let me say that again because I suppose in the end that's the reason why I chose to explore this Bible passage with you today: Paul so clothed the message of the Gospel in the language and even concepts of his hearers that much of what Paul was saying sounded familiar to them. We'll see just how far that's the case in a second. Basically, Paul's sermon runs from verse 22 to verse 31. It seems to me that the novelty is confined to the last two verses. The previous eight verses are perfectly Christian, of course, but what I want to drive home is the fact that they are full of the language and concepts that were familiar to either the Stoics or the Epicureans.

22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 23 For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. 24 The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. 26 From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, 27 so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. 28 For "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own

poets have said, "For we too are his offspring." ²⁹ Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. ³⁰ While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.'

Just look at this closely with me, would you? In verse 22, Paul begins with a compliment. A cynic might even call it flattery. 'Men of Athens, I see that you are very religious'. He tells them he's seen their altars, including the one to 'The Unknown God', and when he tells them that what they worship as unknown he wishes to proclaim to them, he is in fact crediting them with worshipping, if inadequately, the one true God. It is their ignorance (to which he returns in verse 30), rather than their worship, which is emphasised; but he does credit them with worship. He goes as far as he can, it seems to me, in his opening remark, to affirm the values and religious beliefs of those to whom he is preaching. And he does this, in spite of the actual distress he was himself feeling about their idolatry. He doesn't begin by saying: 'Men of Athens, you bunch of idolaters, repent now of blasphemous activity which stinks in the nostrils of the True and Living God'. 'Men of Athens', he says, 'I see that you are very religious. Well done. But let me tell you now about the God you yourselves admit you don't know'.

In verse 24, he then opens his proclamation of the Gospel with a statement that would have been very acceptable to the Epicureans: God, being

transcendent, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human beings (not even in the Parthenon), and being self-sufficient, is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Against the Stoics, Paul is proclaiming the independence of God from creation: God is not part of the created order, he is qualitatively separate from it. He'll have had the Epicureans cheering at that point.

But in case he loses his Stoic listeners, he is quick to add that 'God himself gives to everyone *life* (that's a key word for Stoics) and *breath* (another one), and everything'. Then the whole of verses 26 to 28 might have been lifted from a handbook of Stoic philosophy. Stoics believed in a form of predestination: and Paul agrees with them in verse 26, that God had allotted the nations their own places and times (with, of course, a particularly privileged role reserved for the Greeks as opposed to all the non-Greek Barbarians, to which Paul's insistence that all nations are derived from one ancestor may have been a mild rebuke). He says this: *From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live.* Now, friends, be honest. Which of you said anything like that in the 90 second summaries of the gospel you rehearsed at Justin's invitation this morning? If you had 90 seconds to spare, when would you ever think it was important to spend time stating the boundaries of the places God appointed particular nations to occupy? How is that a Gospel priority — unless in fact it provides a point of contact with your audience? I cannot think of any other reason why Paul would think it important to say. Next comes a statement affirming the immanence of a God 'who is not far from each one of us'. This God longs us for us to seek him: he is the Eternal Seeker. Then in verse 28, he

twice quotes Stoic philosophers to support his case: when he says 'in him we live and move and have our being', that's a quotation from the 6th century BC poet, Epimenides of Cnossos in Crete; and when he says 'we are God's offspring', he's quoting from the 3rd century BC poet Aratus from Cilicia – which was Paul's own native province, of course. Then in verse 29, switching back to a more Epicurean mindset, and this is quite shocking really, he even uses an impersonal name for God: he calls God 'the Deity'. The Greek is not *theos* but *theiov*. You could translate it, 'the divine'. This is what it meant for Paul to be a Jew to the Jew and a Greek to the Greeks and to be all things to all people. He is a Stoic to the Stoics, an Epicurean to the Epicureans, that by all possible means he might at least save some.

I can't exaggerate how important I believe this is for evangelism in any context, but especially for evangelism in a context as foreign to most of us as the contemporary world has become. In the synagogues, Paul always argued from the Scriptures. That's what he did in Thessalonica and in Beroea. But not in Athens. What would be the point of quoting a book nobody there read or held to be authoritative? It would be futile. Instead, he quotes as authoritative the texts which his hearers regard as authoritative. Isn't that astonishing? He did his homework, and found in the writings of Stoic philosophers quotations he could use in his presentation of the good news about Jesus and the Resurrection — I find that immensely challenging.

You see: I'm a passionate enthusiast for the Bible, thoroughly committed to refreshing biblical literacy among our church members and to fostering the expectation that God will meet with us and speak to us in its pages. In other words, I am a passionate advocate of the Bible as a means of grace. But I would

nevertheless say, not least on the basis of this passage, that in most evangelistic preaching and even in most evangelistic conversation, there is too much quoting of the Bible, and too little quoting of texts which are held to be authoritative by the communities with which we're engaged. In fact, I'll say it again: to my mind, in most evangelistic preaching and conversation, there is too much quoting of the Bible, and too little quoting of texts which are held to be authoritative by the communities with which we're engaged.

Here's an interesting fact. There are 51 occasions in the synoptic Gospels (that's Matthew, Mark and Luke) on which Jesus quotes from the Old Testament. Of these, the vast majority are addressed either to his disciples or to the religious leaders, for both of whom, as for Jesus, the Old Testament was an authoritative text. There are only six occasions, or rather, there are only two occasions, reported in all three synoptic Gospels, when Jesus quotes the Old Testament to the crowd, the common people. And those two occasions were when the people asked him religious questions, like the time the crowd asked him 'Who is John the Baptist?', and he replied, 'This is the one of whom it was written, 'I will send my messenger before my face'. So why that pattern in the Gospels? Why does Jesus quote the Old Testament to his disciples and to his opponents, but hardly at all to the crowd? It must surely be because he knew that it cut no ice with the crowd. They weren't trying to live by the Scriptures. It wasn't an authority to them, not in practice, not day to day. So he told them stories instead.

Now, given that fact, and given the fact that here in our passage Paul does not quote the Old Testament (which his audience neither knew nor accepted as authoritative, but quotes a pagan author instead) why, in evangelistic sermon

after evangelistic sermon do we still hear preachers supporting their arguments by quoting the Bible? I can even remember one evangelistic talk at University, where the preacher waved his big black leather bound book above his head and said, 'The Bible says, In him we live and move and have our being'. I remember at the time, as a committed member of the CU which had organised the mission (and we could still call it a mission in those days, rather than an events week — this is over 30 years ago, thinking 'That's a bit ironic, given that those are the words Paul quotes from a pagan poet'. Is it because we think that there is some magic about the words of the Bible which will convert the unconverted? Paul did not. His example proves that glimmerings of the truth are to be found in non-Christian authors, and that, by crediting them, we may be able to help our audience to move towards God. If you want to establish the truth of the Gospel in the minds of your hearers, you have to do it by quoting texts that they believe to be true – not the ones you believe to be true!

In the last two verses of his sermon, Paul criticises the Stoics and the Epicureans alike, very specifically, for their idolatry. Idolatry, of course, can be as much mental as metal: it's the attempt to confine and domesticate God, to localise and control him. In that sense, Christians can be as guilty of idolatry as anyone. Idols are also substitutes for God: in that sense, job, wife, children, money, sex, power. I suspect that idolatry is every bit as alive and well in twenty-first century Sheffield, say, as it was in first century Athens.

And it's also only in the final two verses – in verses 30 and 31 – that Paul turns to the novel elements in his message, and introduces the three elements which I take to be the irreducible components of any Christian evangelistic sermon: first, he includes a summons to repentance, second he includes a

reference to Jesus, as God's chosen one; and thirdly, he includes an invitation to faith in the resurrection (the word *pistis* in verse 31 is misleadingly translated 'assurance' in some versions). Some commentators have made a great deal out of the fact that Jesus isn't even named in this sermon. But that's no big deal in my view. This is, as I say, Luke's summary of what Paul said, and to me it's clear from verse 18 that the two words he used almost more than any others were 'Jesus' and resurrection. At any rate, it's worth noting that it was a reference there to the resurrection that provoked this formal hearing; and another reference to the resurrection in verse 31 brings it to an end.

And of all the new things in Paul's preaching, the one that will most have startled his hearers was the notion of resurrection. That's why it's singled out in verse 18. The resurrection of the body was an equally alien concept to both Stoics and Epicureans. The Epicureans had no hope of any afterlife whatsoever, and the most that the Stoics hoped for was the immortality of the soul. In fact, one of Athen's most famous poets had once written, in a play intended to mark the opening of the Areopagus, the very place in which Paul was preaching, 'When the dust has soaked up a man's blood, once he is dead, there is no afterlife'. Sounds quite like our culture to me. Even in church, it seems to me, people aren't very clear that our hope of eternal life is a hope of a bodily resurrection; and outside the church, people either have no hope of an afterlife, or just a vague hope in some kind of immortality.

You might think that what Paul doesn't say is as striking as what he says. I've already pointed out that he doesn't quote the Bible. Nor does he mention the cross. Of course, it's implied by a reference to the resurrection: Jesus could only be raised by God from the dead, because he was first crucified. But Paul

apparently did not feel he had to spell that out — either that, or Luke didn't find it necessary to include it in his summary. Similarly, the concepts of sin and the fall are of course implied by the call to repentance: but again, Paul does not spell them out. In his evangelistic preaching, in other words, Paul is prepared to go a long way to meet the Athenians metaphorically on their own ground.

And that seems to me to be the essential challenge that this passage puts to anyone who is engaged in evangelism anywhere, but above all to those of us who minister in England today. Where are the equivalents in our community of the market place and the Areopagus in Athens? And what are the equivalents here, in our culture, of Stoicism and Epicureanism? If we were to begin a sermon with the words, 'People of Doncaster' or 'People of Rotherham', how would we go on? What are the language and the concepts with which we should clothe the Gospel here, in order that, by the grace of God, local people might be moved to repentance and faith in the name of Jesus? What are the pagan poets we might want to quote? Is it tv celebrities, maybe, or online Bloggers and Vloggers? And dare we lean over so far to accommodate the Gospel message to the culture of our hearers that we risk being labelled 'seed-pickers'?

3. The Fruit of the Sermon (verses 32 to 34)

And that brings us finally to the outcome of the sermon in the last three verses. Luke is quite explicit about it:

³² When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, 'We will hear you again about this.' ³³ *At that point Paul left them.* ³⁴ *But some of them joined him and*

became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

I don't know how it is for you, but Luke's summary rings completely true to my own experience. Especially where the talk is about the resurrection of the dead, some scoff. That's an unpleasantly familiar response to every evangelist, including Billy Graham. Scoffing isn't pretty and it can be hurtful, but I'm afraid it goes with the territory if you're faithful in communicating the Gospel of a resurrection.

Others – some I suspect with complete sincerity and others perhaps with less – said, 'We need more time. We want to hear more'. Some come back for more, and others don't. Some intend to, but never quite manage it; others never really intend to and either way it's a desperately disappointing experience for any minister, to see someone drift away from the Gospel when they've begun to engage with it.

But some believed in Athens, and by God's grace they continue to do it to this day. They didn't just 'become believers', they joined Paul. That's to say: conversion in the New Testament means joining the Christian community. It's not just about accepting a message; it's about enrolling, enlisting, signing on, becoming identified with the followers of Jesus.

I love the fact that the fruit of Paul's preaching in Athens is named: we're talking real people here, real lives. Dionysius the Areopagite must have been one of the lecturers, one of the philosophers, a real insider, one of Athen's intellectual elite. And Damaris, a woman about whom we know nothing else. One of the greatest of all privileges in ministry is to look back and to be able to call to mind those who have become disciples of Jesus, when we have had the

extraordinary privilege of being around and involved. Here in this Diocese, it happens. In all your churches — or at least, I hope it does. Not because you are stunningly good at communicating the Gospel; but because God is at work by his Spirit.

We do have a responsibility to communicate the gospel. Indeed, I am trying to convey the responsibility we have to be highly creative and imaginative about that and to work hard at it. It just won't do to settle for a communication of the Gospel which is flat, lazy and defensive, on the grounds that we just can't be bothered to re-imagine it for our own time and place. But in comparison with what Paul models for us in this passage, I fear that's exactly what much contemporary evangelism has become. Flat, lazy and defensive — flat, because we treat it like something fixed, where Paul is contextual and dynamic; lazy, because we rely on the tried and tested, even when we have so little evidence that it is effective; where Paul is ready to improvise, but to improvise out of a careful and attentive engagement with his audience, and defensive, in that we are apparently unwilling to take the sort of risks Paul took in framing the gospel in the language that our hearers understand — and it is a risk. So part of what I do want to do today is to encourage you, for the sake of commending Christ in a sceptical world, to be contextual, attentive and adventurous in the way you frame the Gospel message.

But I need also to remind you that in the end evangelism is God's own project. He's quite capable of drawing people to himself without us — he will do it in spite of us if he can do it through us. So when we do seek to rise to the challenge of communicating our faith in ways that build on the example Paul offers us here, that's to say in ways that are dynamic, daring and the result of a

serious and sustained engagement with our culture, it's still true that all we're really doing is seeking to find out where God is already at work, and joining in. It's his mission, and he is calling us to be his co-workers. So we can be certain there will be Damaris's and Dionysius's in this Diocese, from Campbell to Anston, from Penistone to Goole, just as there were in Athens. And for that, thanks be to God. Amen.