

Acts 17:22-34
Feilding Baptist
29th September 2024

Call to Worship

Welcome to worship at Feilding Baptist!

Philippians 1:9-11 (NLT)

9 I pray that your love will overflow more and more, and that you will keep on growing in knowledge and understanding. 10 For I want you to understand what really matters, so that you may live pure and blameless lives until the day of Christ's return. [11 May you always be filled with the fruit of your salvation—the righteous character produced in your life by Jesus Christ—for this will bring much glory and praise to God.]

Prayer

Lord God of heaven and earth,
Creator of our world, and everything in it,
yet as close to us as our own breath—holy is Your name.

In You we live and move and have our being;
we are Your own children,
the work of Your hands.

We pray that Your Holy Spirit
would move among us as we worship,
opening our eyes to Your presence,
opening our ears to Your Word.

Receive the worship of our hearts and minds and bodies;
may it be a pleasing offering to You.

We pray in the name of Your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ,
in whose death and resurrection we find life. Amen.

Message - Apprentices

It is God who is all knowing, and not restricted or confined by our image or knowledge.

Now you might be concerned to know, that one type of seagull is in decline in New Zealand. Have you seen any in Feilding, well, that's proves the point! New Zealand has three native species of seagull. And the red billed one, is in decline all over New Zealand. Except in Otago. At the end of the Otago Peninsula is Taiaroa Head, with it's gun emplacement, and nesting grounds for the royal albatross.

Most people go to see the albatross, a few go to see the gun emplacements, even less go to see seagulls. Dirty, squawking, pooing, things. There are not just a handful, but thousands of them all over the cliffs. But here's the interesting thing. People mistake them the albatross'. Sure, up close you can tell them apart, but from a distance, and in the air, not as easy.

Taking visitors out there, you see all these birds flying, we would say, if you're not sure if it's an albatross, it won't be. Because when you see an albatross fly, there is no doubt. They glide, don't flap their wings. And they are magnificent.

How do you tell them apart in the air - well, that's the point.

Ten thousand miles, 16 thousand kilometres, is the distance Paul is thought to have walked on his three missionary journeys. He had a fourth to Rome, but was being taken. The first journey we followed in chapter 14, with Paul finding opposition in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. Paul and Silas get to Derbe, and instead of

carrying on through the hills to Paul's home town of Tarsus, they return to the places they've been beaten, imprisoned, and kicked out of. It's a massive show of grace.

Jasmine spoke last week from Acts 15, reminding us again of grace. Her healthy challenge to us was to be known for compassion rather than things we're against. That's a far more positive message. And that does fit with what Paul was saying in Jerusalem.

At the end of the chapter 15, the disciples head off again, to the towns of the first journey, to encourage and strengthen the believers (15:32). But this second journey would end up being twice the length of the first, and go in unexpected directions.

This unexpected direction we covered in the first Covid lockdown in 2020 when we looked at Philippians. We covered it again in June, when Acts 16 was part of our mission series. Paul wanted to head one way, and the Holy Spirit guided them elsewhere. They ended up in Macedonia, in Philippi the leading city of the area, the place with the woman with the purple cloth lived and traded - what was her name? That didn't go well, they were arrested, beaten, and imprisoned. And then it was discovered that they were Roman citizens, which made the authorities very nervous. Graciously Paul moved on again, after being asked to leave, and arrives in Thessalonica, chapter 17.

Here Paul preaches in the Jewish synagogues about the Messiah, about Jesus (17:2-3). Now, that's so appropriate, because Jewish people knew the Old Testament, knew about this person who was to come. And many people get it, and turn their allegiance to Jesus. But the Jewish leaders realise that their influence is waning, and they stir up trouble, involving the people in the marketplace, and causing a riot (v5).

Now there's two things to notice here. Remember Jesus story about the people in the marketplace being employed at 9 o'clock, midday, later in the day, and all getting paid the same. This is the setting. The unemployed sat in the marketplace waiting for work. These are the people who are employed to cause the riot.

But, read v6, they then go to the authorities and accuse Paul and Silas of causing trouble! What have they just done?! But v7 is a wonderful verse, worth remembering and reflecting on. Paul is telling people that Caesar isn't king after all, it's Jesus (17:7). This gets the Romans' attention.

Once again, Paul leaves, this time during the night, going to Berea. Now I'm fascinated with the people here, and this is one of the links to the seagulls. The people are fascinated with Paul and Silas are telling them, and they study the Scriptures, to check it out. They want to learn. They're teachable. They didn't write this new teaching off without checking it out.

I'm impressed. But then the trouble makers from Thessalonica turn up, so Paul is escorted out of trouble and down to Athens.

Once Paul gets to Athens, he continues speaking, to Jews and Greeks in the Synagogues, and also the people in the market place (17:17). And here it gets interesting, because the philosophers of Athens, ask, who is this babbler? Or in another translation, who is this scavenger of tidbits? They are accusing Paul of being a seagull! These birds that scavenge for your chips before you're finished, disturb the peace, and leave deposits on people and cars - especially at Taiaroa Head.

It's not very respectful to be likened to a seagull! But this is what happens to Paul in Athens!

But I believe Luke (as the writer of Acts) is really saying something about the people of the three towns in Acts 17. For some devoured the word that Paul was bringing, and others scoffed and didn't take it seriously at all. It sounds like Jesus' parable of the sower.

The sower throws seed as a preacher throws the message of Jesus. Some of the seed falls on fertile ground, is accepted and grows a great crop. Other seed falls on rocky ground, and just can't get going. Other seed falls where - good ground but the weeds smother the young plants. And some falls on the path, and what happens, seagulls come and snatch it away!

And that's exactly what is happening here. The opposition to Jesus is snatching away the message from those who want and need to hear it. The message of grace... So it's actually not Paul who is the seagull, it's the opposition. So in accusing Paul, they're actually identifying with themselves. They're the annoying scavengers. Paul is the albatross, soaring high above.

And this is the challenge to us, to soar like the albatross, and don't be like a squawking pest! We're being called here to side with Paul, not with the babblers.

People go to Taiaroa Head to see the albatross gracefully fly. How do we fly? Let's hear what Paul has to say. He is brought from the marketplace, to the Areopagus, the council of bigwigs. This is an incredible opportunity. Will he talk about Jesus? Will he talk about the new King?

Let's read from v22

Acts 17:22-34 New International Version - UK

In Athens

22 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: 'People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 23 For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship - and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

24 'The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. 25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. 26 From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. 27 God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 28 "For in him we live and move and have our being."^[a] As some of your own poets have said, "We are his offspring."^[b]

29 'Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone - an image made by human design and skill. 30 In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 31 For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.'

32 When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, 'We want to hear you again on this subject.' 33 At that, Paul left the Council. 34 Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

Footnotes

Acts 17:28 From the Cretan philosopher Epimenides

Acts 17:28 From the Cilician Stoic philosopher Aratus

v22-28

Paul begins aggressively, telling the Council straight, that he finds it bizarre, that a very religious people have no idea who they are worshipping (v23)! So he begins the good news of God, in v24, that God isn't created by us, nor does God depend on us. God doesn't need us to exist. It is God who gives life and breath and everything else, v25, God gives our very being, v28.

So it is equally bizarre to think that God might be constrained or confined to a place or a building. Even more crazy to think that God might be where we want, as the image we want, bound by the extent of our knowledge. God is far bigger, far greater, than anything we can imagine.

As the Almighty God, it is great news that not only is God there for us, v27, He is close by us. This isn't something to fear, but delight in, for God is good, compassionate, kind.

Paul tells the Council that that not only is God real, God is alive!

v29-31

But in case they miss the point, Paul says, God isn't something we've made, something we've made out of gold, silver or stone, v29. God is not made in our image - we are made in God's image (Genesis 1:27). When we make idols, we make them in our image, in the image of what we know, or want, or expect of God. This is idolatry! We worship something of our own creation. Something that is effectively dead. Very convenient though, then we make all the rules, we're in charge.

But Genesis makes it really clear, we are made in the image of God, not the other way around.

Why would we create a god in our image?

What are we uncomfortable about in regard to God?

Is our own image more comfortable?

What are the idols we're creating in the place of God?

We finish with v31 with the reminder that God will judge the world. We're usually happy with that, oh, see what it says here, God will judge the world in righteousness - oh, that's what the NASB says, look what the NIV says, judge the world with justice! Remember a few weeks ago I was saying that justice and righteousness go together. Here is evidence of that, one saying righteousness, the other justice. It's about rectifying, putting right, restoring.

And in this case it's about righting the wrong that evil and sin and Satan have brought on the world. These are the things that are judged, these are the things that won't be coming into the new heavens and the new earth. No more crying, dying, pain. No more war, threats of war, abuse, theft, dishonesty and disrespect.

The proof of this just and righteous judging is the risen Jesus, risen alive from the tomb. Death could not hold Him, and neither will it hold us.

So will the Areopagus accept what Paul has to say? Well, some sneer, and some say, hmmm, I'd like to hear some more, v32.

What will we do?

As we look at Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens, we see two types of people. Some are soaring, and some are squabbling birds. It seems that we have a choice - will we be as a squawking seagull or will we soar like the albatross?

Accepting that God is real, alive, and calling us to repent, to make Jesus our King is Paul's challenge then, and to us now.

Benediction

May God, who has begun a good work within you,
continue that work until the day when Christ Jesus returns.
May your love overflow more and more;
may you continue to grow in knowledge and understanding,
so that you can clearly discern what really matters,
and so that you may stand pure and blameless before God
on the day of Christ's return.

We go in peace to love and serve the Lord,
In the name of Jesus. Amen.