

May 14 2023, The Sixth Sunday of Easter: Acts 17:23-31

Paul writes: *For 'in (God) we live and move and have our being,' as even some of your own poets have said. 'For we, too, are his offspring'* (v 28). It would be easy to give this verse a nod of approval. However, let us pause for a moment. Paul is obviously quoting pagan wisdom; this may surprise. Yet, Paul is completely consistent with early Christian thinking and perennial Jewish assumptions. Simply stated: all truth is from God; no truth exists apart from God. God is Truth, the source of all truth. A related principle: truth cannot contradict itself. While human beings regularly disagree about what constitutes truth, once truth is established the human source of such truth is irrelevant, or at least of secondary importance, since all truth is God's truth.

For 'in (God) we live and move and have our being;' *'For we, too, are his offspring.'* The fact that such truth came from pagans was inconsequential to Paul: Truth is truth. Christians are by calling, desire, and grace, inquisitive people, open to truth from any intermediate source it comes. Indeed, where would humanity be without the insights of psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, geography, geology, astronomy, biology, medicine? What would we be without the development of music and the arts, the joy of literature and poetry? Would we have ever climbed down from the trees without the discoveries and inventions of the sciences?

The principle 'Truth is Truth' is not merely esoteric philosophy. It is also a defense against a popular, pernicious, and perennial heresy: utilitarianism. Utilitarianism assumes truth is decided by usefulness. As an example, a utilitarian could reasonably hold that if a believable lie results in 51% of the vote, its lack of truth is irrelevant. Its 'truth' is found in the result, not the thing itself. This is incompatible with Christian moral teaching.

For 'in (God) we live and move and have our being;' and, *'For we, too, are his offspring.'* Paul recognized the Truth contained, also testified to by the Hebrew Scriptures, the teachings of Jesus, and the Church's experience and faith. At the heart of Judaism and Christianity stands one paradoxical truth: God is transcendent and immanent. God is utterly transcendent—wholly other, unknowable, immutable, unalterable, inaccessible, ineffable, unfathomable. We are to God what a pebble is to the Universe. God is also completely immanent—always present, accessible, yearning, loving, anxious for relationship, closer to us than we are to ourselves. The Psalmist testifies: *...where can I flee from your presence? If I climb up to heaven, you are there; if I make the grave my bed, you are there also...Your eyes beheld my limbs, yet unfinished in the womb; all of them were written in your book...* (Psalm 139: 6b, 7, 15a). God is not present because or only when we perceive God's presence. God is simply, absolutely, present.

God is always radically with us out of love. God is not distant, disinterested, or disgusted with humanity. God weeps for us, dies for us. To follow Jesus in spirit and truth entails surrendering the pretense of self-sufficiency, the arrogance of pride, the delusion that God is absent and therefore I can do as I please, or worse, live in despair.

God's transcendence/immanence is not theological mumbo-jumbo. God's transcendence and immanence shape our understanding of redemption, conversion, and salvation. God is with us, always and relentlessly. A sense of God's absence comes from our own blindness, willfulness, arrogance, and/or despondency. When we feel God's absence, which happens to everyone, the question is not 'Where is God?' but what is preventing me from knowing, living in God's love? We fixate on our own will, or substitute lesser joys, or are blind with resentment, anguish, or anger that we cannot or will not surrender. God loves us beyond our myopic estimation of fulfillment and joy. God loves us too much to leave us trapped in ourselves. An open secret of conversion is that such transformation is not a quest to find God; it is always about letting go of, cleaning out the clutter and futility of our lives so we may live in, for, and through Christ, who is always, already here, who cherishes us and abides with us from before time. Conversion's other secret is radical trust that God will give us all we need to grow up into the fullness of Christ as God perfectly wills for us, when we are ready to receive it, according to God's time, not ours. The One we seek is already here. *For we, too, are his offspring; in (God) we live and move and have our being.* God is to us what water is to a fish, what air is to a bird. We swim in God, we fly in God, who loves us beyond passion, deeper than eternity.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, now and for ever. Amen.