

## Acts 17:16-31

### The mosaic of life: making sense of things

#### Introduction: "It doesn't make sense"

My favourite ad on TV over summer was for Canadian Club, 'the alternative to beer'. If you watched any test cricket over December and January – in fact, if you watched any TV at all – you would've seen this ad. It starts with a guy sheepishly whispering to his mate, "*I don't like beer anymore*", and then stunned silence from everyone around. The man's honest confession has an unexpected effect though. It triggers some heartfelt reflection among the beer drinkers, and they start to question whether beer really is the only drink for summer. The ad finishes with this cool bartender in a crisp white tennis polo cracking open a Canadian Club, and with a suave raising of the eyebrows, inviting the crowd to try it as a refreshing alternative to beer.

I think it's a brilliant ad. Not because I'm a fan of Canadian Club – I've never actually tried it. But because of the marketing genius. Canadian Club is mounting a coup to overthrow beer as the drink of summer for Aussie men and it very cleverly undermines beer's status as the macho man's drink. At one point, there's this huge bloke with a deep voice who pops the question: "*Who made beer the boss of summer?*"

But the line the whole ad hinges on is this: "*It doesn't make sense.*" As the beer drinkers reflect, they realise it doesn't make sense that everyone should drink beer in summer.

So I love this ad because of its cleverness. But it's also a brilliant insight, I think, into how people can approach life or feel about life – at least from time-to-time if not most of the time. It's easy isn't it to fall into a rut doing life even though, if pressed, it doesn't always make a lot of sense to us? Even as Christians we might know that life – our life – apparently does make sense according to the Bible, and yet suffer a nagging sense sometimes that we're really not quite sure how – though we try to get on with it and keep it together. If you're honest, does life – your life – always make sense to you?

And we obviously can't separate this 'making sense' from the circumstances we experience – what I've called the 'mosaic of life' because of the very varied nature of what each of us faces day-to-day. Right now the harsh reds, oranges and yellows of COVID19 in the mosaic are in our faces. The situation is confusing and troubling in lots of ways and I'm sure the unfolding of the COVID19 situation doesn't make complete sense to any of us. But of course COVID19 doesn't have a monopoly on the troubles and confusions of life. You know, what's with no rain for years? What's with catastrophic fires on top of that? What's with broken marriages, broken families, unemployment, missed opportunities, failing bodies, getting old with dementia, wayward kids, the daily grind? What's with all that? Things that are a reality for many, virus or no virus.

But – let's also not forget that the mosaic of life isn't all bad! It's obviously dotted throughout with many wonderful things: good relationships, friends, bodies that do work well, amazing autumn days, rainfall (when it comes), laughter, refreshment, health, kindness, ... Life really is a mosaic of good and bad, easy and tough, gentle and hard, painful and joyful. The very fact that life is such a mixture may only serve to reinforce the feeling that it doesn't always make sense.

So – what do our lives mean? 70 or 80 years we get... maybe. At any rate, just a blip in history. Can we make sense of it? And can we make sense of God who's apparently in charge of life? You can see why, left to ourselves, people might get depressed, discouraged, restless, frustrated, angry and confused about life. With a bit of honest reflection – like the unhappy beer drinkers in the ad – it's not hard to see how people might conclude: it just doesn't make sense.

Well, on that upbeat note...

Can we make sense of God and life – even right now in the turmoil of 2020? As Christians we know the answer is 'absolutely' – even if it isn't always our experience. And we could turn to many parts of the Bible for help, including this brief account of the apostle Paul's visit to Athens in Acts 17. Paul's sermon to the Athenians is a gem – and my prayer is that reflecting on it now will do one of 3 things for those listening:

- (i) If you're not a Christian, that it might bring some fresh clarity to how you see God and your life;
- (ii) If you're a Christian but sometimes have that nagging sense that your life doesn't make much sense, that it will help re-focus your vision;
- (iii) And if this idea of life not making sense really doesn't appear on your radar – praise God, what a blessing – that this section would motivate and equip in you helping others make sense of life.

Ok, first some quick context. Paul's in Athens, and the Athenians clearly have many gods on offer. As Paul diplomatically puts it in v22, 'they are very religious'. And their altar 'to an unknown God' is a classic spiritual 'hedging of bets'. Quite simply, the Athenians were spiritually clueless and confused. Most importantly, they didn't know God – Father, Son and Spirit – from the Bible. So when Paul gets an audience with them, it's what you'd call the proverbial 'blank sheet'. What's he going to say about God and the meaning of things to these guys? He obviously can't say everything. So what does he choose? That's why I think Paul's sermon can be so helpful to us – because it distils life down to some 'essentials'. Paul tells them 3 things:

#### **Lord: A God who makes sense**

(i) Number 1. God is the Lord. Notice v24: *"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth... He's not served by human hands as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives all people life and breath and everything else."* That's the first thing Paul wants to say. God's the Lord of everything. He's the creator; the owner; the provider. People don't give to God – He gives to them. Life. Breath. Everything. It means that everyone – the Athenians, you and I – depend 100% on God – knowingly or unknowingly. This fact of God's total ownership is summed up in a word: Lord. God's the Lord.

That's an important place to start isn't it? There is a God who makes sense because there is a God who is unequivocally and unquestionably, LORD. A supremely kind-hearted ultra-ruler – who gives us life and breath and everything – and who can also take it away. Everything issues from this Lord – and all praise rightly goes back to Him. We need to grasp this to properly make sense of things. As Paul says in Romans 11:35-36 – *"Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?" For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever!"* Or as the elders in Revelation respond: *"You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."* God makes sense because He is the Lord.

#### **Involved: A life that makes sense**

(ii) Number 2. God is involved. Although we might not know everything about God and how he operates in life, one thing is for sure: God knows everything about us. That's what it says in v26: *"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. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him."* When you think about the series of circumstances and decisions that led to your current situation in life – does it feel random? Lucky? Or like one of a billion possible pathways you could've taken – but you ended up on this one? Well no. That's not how it is. According to this part of the Bible, the Lord of heaven and earth mapped out every one of your steps, so that you being in your specific situation, even to being here listening right now, was entirely His intention. Not one iota of randomness about it. We might not understand everything about God and life. Things like droughts, fires, viruses, and the messiness of life – they might remain a bit puzzling to us. But one thing we can be sure of is that He knows us and all the details of our lives, intimately – and not one of those details is random. Why? Why is that? Did you notice the reason in v27: *"God did this so that you would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him."* That's an incredible statement. Everything in your life's mosaic has a purpose: that you would reach out and find God. Have you done that?

God is intimately and purposefully involved in our life, so we know that life does make sense – even if it's not always clear how.

### **Judge: A future that makes sense**

(iii) Number 3. God is judge. That's what it says in v30: *"...He commands all people everywhere to repent [that is, to turn back to Him]. For He has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He's given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead."* That was no doubt a fairly full-on thing for Paul to say to the Athenians. We're accountable to God. Each one of us will be judged. And the judge is Jesus Christ – the one God raised from the dead. I wonder if this sounds a bit rough to you? But if God is the Lord who gives us life and breath and everything else, and if he knows everything about us – the deepest things of our hearts – and if He's worked in our lives so that we reach out for him – then doesn't it make sense that if we decide to reject Him, He'll hold us accountable? If He's the Lord, and if He's given us every opportunity to treat Him as the Lord, but we don't, what else could we expect?

And when you and I face Jesus as judge, the only thing that will matter – the only thing – is how we treated Him. During our life, did we turn back from our way and welcome Jesus? Or did we stick to our way and refuse Jesus?

### **Life that makes sense**

Well, our question was: Can we make sense of things? Can we make sense of God and life? And God's word here gives us three things to start with:

- God is the Lord of everything, including us;
- God knows us completely and has worked out our lives so that we'll reach out for Him;
- And we'll all face God's appointed judge – Jesus Christ. And the only thing that will matter at that future moment is how we've treated Jesus. Did we welcome Him, or not?

So let me finish by speaking specifically to the 3 groups of people I mentioned at the start – and how each one might respond to this word from God in Acts 17.

First – if you're in the "I'm a Christian but could really use some refocusing" category – Acts 17 reminds us of 3 precious truths: God's loving Lordship over us, His purposeful hand in our life, and our secure future. We're not privy to all the answers of life. But what we are privy to are these truths in Acts 17. And we can trust that in God's wisdom and kindness, this is sufficient.

Grasping these truths freshly is like stepping back 2 m from the mosaic and seeing the whole magnificent surface. Not just standing so close that we see only the present circumstances. There's a man I see on my train trip to work in the morning who studies an iPad with a magnifying glass. I know it's not because of his eyesight is bad because I've seen him reading other things quite fine. So I'm guessing he carefully scans online documents, perhaps looking for evidence of doctoring. But what he does with his magnifying glass is what we can do with life – and end up blinkered. The truths in Acts 17 are perspective-giving truths. It's like removing the magnifying glass and catching a glimpse of the whole.

Second – if you're a Christian for whom making sense of God and life isn't really an issue – at least not at the moment – I want to encourage you to think about how you could help others grasp the truths of Acts 17. What Paul chooses to major on with the spiritually confused Athenians does, I think, give us very practical help in our own attempts to prod family, friends and others to be spiritually clearer. So, perhaps one of these questions, springing from Acts 17, might help you in the coming weeks to start a conversation:

- The Bible insists that God is purposeful in what happens in the world and in our lives. What do you think about that?
- Does Jesus feel more or less relevant to you in these current circumstances than normal? Why is that?
- What would you say is the most pressing issue in life right now? [That's interesting, because the Bible says that the most pressing issue for every person, now and always, is how they respond to Jesus. What do you think about that?]

And I'm sure you could think of other questions!

And lastly, if you're not a Christian – maybe the present circumstances have made you pause and consider spiritual things more carefully. That's great. Please keep seeking answers in the Bible. On the other hand, I wonder if for others Jesus seems even more irrelevant now than ever before; I mean the most pressing issues right now are flattening the curve, righting the economy, finding a job and getting people healthy, right? Well, not according to Acts 17. Acts 17 tells us that conclusion would be a huge mistake. It invites us to open our eyes and see that life – our life – is governed by a Lord, who's purposeful, and that Jesus is meant to be at the centre of it. We can't ignore this. Coming back to my favourite ad for Canadian Club. It all started with one guy honestly admitting that he wasn't satisfied with beer. That the life he was living was not working for him. That it didn't make sense. But that's beer. What about life? Are you going to be a someone who admits that the life you've been living is not working for you? That it doesn't make sense. Are you going to take this part of the Bible seriously? That God is the Lord of you? That He knows you? That He's has worked out every bit of your life so that you'll reach out for Him and find Him? And that He's called you to welcome Jesus? Are you going to be that person? Or are you going to be the person that carries on living a life that doesn't make sense and, eventually, meets Jesus the Judge on your own terms? Which person will you be?

So, brothers and sisters – wherever we're at: what difference will these truths in Acts 17 make to us in this present season, and all seasons ahead?