

SERMON – PASTOR GREG GRAHAM

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GOD DOES NOT HAVE ANY GRANDCHILDREN. Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. From Galatians 3 we hear: *You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have (been) clothed with Christ.* Let us pray. Recently I was at lunch in Maryborough with five other Lutheran pastors. One of them has also served in the Presbyterian Church and the Uniting church. He was lamenting that over 30 years of ministry most of his people struggled to understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He said that while most of his people believed that Jesus Christ died for their sins, that they also had to work hard to ensure their salvation. He also lamented that most of his people struggled to share their faith. After lunch we were walking down the street when three people- about 40 years of age- came up to us and asked us if we knew that Jesus loved us. It brought about an interesting conversation. They were from a local Pentecostal Church in Maryborough. Could any of us do that? How do we do evangelism? In my time in the LCA I find that we usually do evangelism by asking people to come to worship or we have youth programs or we build schools or we build aged care homes. But we all struggle with personal evangelism- even in our homes. There is so much grief and guilt in our church over the lack of worship by our children and grandchildren. How can we grow our church? Of course we start from the bedrock of the words of Jesus: Matthew 16:18: *I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.* But we have a part to play as Jesus also said at the end of Matthew's gospel account: *Go and make disciples of all the nations...* But how do we do it? How did the early church go about making disciples of Jesus Christ?

In Acts we hear an account of Paul in Athens. But before his time in Athens Paul went to Thessalonica. There he spent time in the synagogue preaching/teaching/discussing *explaining from the scriptures that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead and that Jesus is the Christ.* And then we hear that: *Some of the Jewish people were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of worshipping Greeks and not a few prominent women.* But not all believed and a mob was formed and Paul and Silas had to escape by night. How did Paul share the Gospel message? By speaking to people who knew what he was talking about- they had the OT and they knew it and they were waiting for a Messiah. Our world is very different. Increasingly Australians are ignorant of the Christian faith. They know something about it from our Christmas and Easter celebrations but as for knowing the Word of God- not much there. And as for a Messiah- not in the sense that the Jewish people had 2000 years ago but if you look at the success of the Batman, Superman, Spiderman and such movies, I put it to you that people are still looking for a hero or saviour or at least someone to admire and look up to. Maybe that is an opening for us to share the story of Jesus Christ.

So while Paul had some success in Thessalonica he was forced to flee. A reminder that the Gospel will always bring about a separation- from those who receive Christ and those who reject him.

Now Paul is in Athens and again he goes to the synagogue. But he also goes to the market place. In Athens, it was not only the place to buy and sell what the world had to offer, it was also a place to discuss the meaning and purpose of life. Greek philosophy had been around for about 300 years by now and we of Stoic and Epicurean philosophers wanting to engage with Paul concerning his words.

Stoics basically believed that all people were to logically consider how to live well and at peace without wanting too much. They sought to find a balance in their lives and they denied the existence of any personal divine beings. All life belonged together and we are to live in harmony with all of life. Sounds very modern doesn't it?

Epicureans believed that there were gods but they also believed that our lives ended when we died. They too sought to live well and to live ethically.

Paul spoke to all who would listen of Jesus and his resurrection. But then he pointed out an altar to an unknown god- Athens was full of idols and many gods were worshipped. So Paul said: *What you worship as unknown I am going to proclaim to you.* The first part of his sermon preached the Creator God. And that can be a good start for us- consider all that God has made- intricate, balanced, manifold and wonderful. Surely it can't all be a result of chance. But as wonderful and incredible creation is- it does not clearly tell us that God is interested in us- that He has a purpose for us or that He loves us. But creation can be a good starting point in our efforts to evangelise.

But Paul did not stop there, he went on to say: *In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now HE commands all people everywhere to repent. (Because judgement is coming).* But what are they to repent of? And on what basis is the judgment to take place? It is easy to tell people that God loves them. It is not so easy to say that: *There is no one who is righteous...all have turned away (from God) ...There is no fear of God before their eyes...all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3).* Not an easy word to say to anyone is it? And as for the basis of judgement- there is only one: *I AM the Way and the Truth and the Life, no one comes to the Father except through me (John 14) ...Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved- the name of Jesus (Acts 4:12).*

But this is the word that Paul preached in Athens. And the result: *A few men became followers of Paul and believed and a few women.* Not such a great result there either. It is a salutary reminder that despite our best efforts most people who hear the Gospel are uninterested or reject it. But we do not give up.

And there is another way to bring the good news of Christ to others. I Peter 3: *Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing...Do not fear what (the world) fears; do not be frightened. But in your hearts always set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience.*

How would you respond if someone asked you why you are a Christian? Are you ready to give an answer for the hope that you have?

I began by saying that GOD DOES NOT HAVE ANY GRANDCHILDREN- what I mean by this is that despite our very best efforts- or even our lack of effort -it is God who brings about salvation. While He wants everyone to live forever with Him in heaven where there is no death, no sin, no guilt, no shame and no darkness, He will not force anyone into heaven. He so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son and He desires all people to repent and trust in His love and His Son. Amen.