

The God you long to know discussion guide

based on **Acts 17.16-34** (Linked to sermon of 7/7/24)
which can be accessed at www.stjamesbythepark.org/talks

This was part of a series of talks from Acts 16-20 exploring Paul's second missionary journey – and what we can learn as a church about putting our church's third aim (reach further with the good news of Jesus) into practice.

Intro: Think of an evangelistic talk (ie a talk which explains the gospel message and encourages people to put their faith in Jesus for the first time) you've heard in the past. What do you remember of it? Why do you think it was memorable?

Read Acts 17.16-21

Paul was distressed to see the city full of idols (v16). What might be some of the idols we have in our culture?

Why did the idols provoke such a strong reaction in Paul (see Isaiah 42.8)? Do our modern-day idols cause you distress? Why / why not?

Writing about these verses, John Stott said: "Why is it that, in spite of the great needs and opportunities of our day, the church slumbers peacefully on, and that so many Christians are deaf and dumb, deaf to Christ's commission and tongue-tied in testimony? I think the major reason is this: we do not speak as Paul spoke because we do not feel as Paul felt. We have never had the paroxysm of indignation which he had. Divine jealousy has not stirred within us. We constantly pray 'Hallowed be your Name', but we do not seem to mean it, or to care that his Name is so widely profaned." Discuss.

Paul's message seems to have been misunderstood at first (v18). In what ways might our attempts to explain the Christian faith be misunderstood by people in our culture?

Read Acts 17.22-31

Paul tried to find a link within their culture from which he could begin to proclaim Christ (v23). He also quoted from some of their own philosophers and poets (v28). What would be some of the equivalent bridge points from our contemporary culture to the gospel – eg in films, TV series, pop songs, magazines etc?

This is the main example within Acts of how Paul preached to Gentile audiences. When speaking to Jews, he based his sermons in OT history and quoted Scripture (eg Acts 13.16-41). In Athens, Paul doesn't do that – but does still start by describing the God of the Bible. Stott writes "He proclaimed God in his fullness as Creator, Sustainer, Ruler, Father and Judge. He took in the whole of nature and of history. He passed the whole of time in review, from the creation to the consummation. He emphasized the greatness of God, not only as the beginning and the end of all things, but as the One to whom we owe our being and to whom we must give account. He argued that human beings already know these things by natural or general revelation, and that their ignorance and idolatry are therefore inexcusable. So he called on them with great solemnity, before it was too late, to repent. Now all this is part of the gospel. Or at least it is the indispensable background to the gospel, without which the gospel cannot effectively be preached. Many people are rejecting our gospel today not because they perceive it to be false, but because they perceive it to be trivial. People are looking for an integrated world-view which makes sense of all their experience. We learn from Paul that we cannot preach the gospel of Jesus without the doctrine of God, or the cross without the creation, or salvation without judgment. Today's world needs a bigger gospel, the full gospel of Scripture." Discuss.

When do you think it's right to include the message of judgment in our evangelism (as Paul does in v30-31) and when is it right to miss that out?

Paul says that God 'commands' all people to repent. Much evangelism merely tends to 'offer' or 'encourage' people to respond to God. What are the pros and cons of each approach?

Read Acts 17.32-34

Spend time praying for the guests on Sunday who 'laughed', who wanted to 'listen more' and who 'leaped' into the lifeboat of Jesus' salvation. Pray too for your friends who aren't Christians. Pray also for members of our Church Council as they continue to pray about and weigh up what different expressions of church we should experiment with as we seek to make disciple-making disciples – as in our 3-D church vision.