

# “Plato’s Ghost”

a sermon by

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Text: “Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (Acts 17:22-23).

Peter Gomes, the minister of the Memorial Church on the Campus of Harvard University, likes to tell the story of the time when he was visiting one of the Deans of the University in the Dean’s office. The Dean beckoned Peter Gomes to the window of his office, inviting him to admire the view of the beautiful Memorial Church. “You know,” said the Dean, “I’m sure that if we were doing this again, we would never put Memorial Church in such a prominent location, right in the middle of Harvard Yard.”

Peter Gomes, never one to float past bait offered by a pompous pagan, replied, “Well, we are there. And we’re not moving. Get used to it.”

## I.

One of the great tensions in the Christian faith is the tension between “faith” and “reason.” On the one hand, we acknowledge the faith, “once for all entrusted to the saints,” (Jude 3). Yet, through the ages the church has struggled to understand faith in terms of the world in which we live. Paul Tillich once wrote a remarkable autobiography, entitled *On the Boundary*, in which he described his own life as a tension between faith and doubt, theology and philosophy, and between religion and culture.

There has always been a tension in the church between “Jerusalem” and “Athens.” Jerusalem always symbolized the role of “revelation” in religion, while “Athens” symbolized the role of reason. Certainly that is obvious in the Scripture that we read today. The Book of Acts recounts Paul’s visit to Greece, and particularly to the two major cities of ancient Greece, Athens and Corinth.

The Athens that the Apostle Paul visited was really a shadow of the Athens of the “Golden Age” of Pericles, and the time that the great philosophers Socrates and Plato held court in the marketplace or agora. According to the Book of Acts when Paul visited the city of Athens, he was taken back by the vast number of idols that he saw in the city. Acts tells us that Paul spent his Sabbaths proclaiming the Christian gospel in the Synagogues and during the other days spoke to the crowds in the marketplace that often gathered for debate and discussion. The Greeks, who were always excited about new ideas, invited Paul to speak at the Areopagus, which was the center of the city’s intellectual life. In speaking to them, Paul noted that the Athenians were a very religious people. In fact, Paul observed that he had found an altar with the inscription “to an unknown god.” Paul used that occasion to make this startling assertion. “What you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you”.

Iain Torrance in his inauguration convocation at Princeton Seminary this fall, spoke of the importance of having a religious faith as well as the capacity to respect those who may have another faith. At one point in his address he spoke of what Arnold Toynbee once called “Plato’s ghost”--the notion that “if I am right, then you must be wrong.” So how do we negotiate that sometimes difficult aspect of living in a pluralistic world without giving up the notion of truth?

## II.

In the first place, the church has to affirm its conviction that Jesus Christ is the decisive revelation of God. There are many things that Christians, Jews, and Muslims hold in common. But there are some things that we do not share in common. One of those is the role of Jesus Christ. For Christians, Christ is the Messiah for whom the prophets longed. He is not just a prophet, not just a great teacher, a magnificent idealist, and ethical giant. He is the Son of God.

I think at times the church has been reluctant to say this. We want to be relevant. We don't want to offend. William Willimon, who for a number of years was the Dean of the Chapel at Duke University once told an angry Duke alumnus who called him complaining that there was a Marxist teaching in the English Department at Duke. Willimon told the alum that "the man was an enormously popular teacher, principally because he was a fanatic, out to convert everyone to Marxism." Young people, Willimon observed, "are always eager to be born again." Willimon went on to say that "he personally would not want to be either a Marxist or a Mercury dealer, but that "he thought that this Marxist was probably a help to the Christians because if some poor old Marxist can come out of the closet, lay his cards on the table, and admit that he wants to convert people to Marxism, then maybe a compromised Presbyterian in the Department of Religion can say, "Now I am a Presbyterian and this probably makes a difference in how I have structured this course, but who knows? I might even end up converting someone to my point of view."

The point is that all of us stand somewhere. There is no innocent, neutral, a historical starting point for thought. Everyone thinks out of some intellectual community, some tradition, some thought process by which we try to make sense of truth.

Some years ago the headmaster of one of the private schools here in Charlotte asked me to preach the Baccalaureate service as part of the graduation exercises. He went on to remind me that some of the students were non-Christians and that I needed to temper my remarks in light of that. As I reflected on that conversation, I admit to you that I don't have two different files of sermons--one of them rooted in the conviction of God's revelation in Jesus Christ and the other rooted in common wisdom that might apply to all people. Is it not time for those of us in the church to cease having to apologize for our faith?

### III.

In the second place, the renewal of the church in our time, humanly speaking, is dependent on the church's capacity to proclaim its faith without apology or equivocation. Three years ago I visited the Acropolis in Athens. There is still a spot there entitled "Mars Hill" that marks the place where Paul made his address to the Athenians. As I stood there, I could not help but wonder what it would be like to stand in the very shadow of one of the greatest intellectual achievements of Western Civilization and proclaim that God had raised this Jew, Jesus, from the dead. I am sure the Athenians were incredulous. They had never heard anything like this before.

We don't know much about what happened in Athens after Paul left. There is no evidence that Paul's preaching there had any real influence. There was no church at Athens in the New Testament. By the time Paul got to Corinth he had changed his message somewhat. There, according to his own words, he did not come proclaiming the mystery of God in lofty words or wisdom. In Corinth he decided that he would know "nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (I Corinthians 2:1-2).

That is where evangelism always starts, with the simple proclamation of Jesus Christ as the light of the world. Karl Barth once observed that we proclaim Christ as the light of the world

not on the basis of our own wisdom or arrogance but on the basis of the witness of God in the Old and New Testament.

Now, don't get me wrong. I am not arguing for intolerance or arrogance. We are all sinners. We are all creatures, and not the creator. We often talk about "Islamic Fundamentalism" and the radical view of Islam that has produced terrorism and 'jihad.'" But Christianity is not immune from this. Some weeks ago I learned of a Bible study group being formed in Charlotte. In order to be a part of it a person had to qualify on three counts: they could not drink alcohol; they could not be divorced; and they could not be over weight. (I was glad I was not invited since I would be disqualified on all three counts). Where do we get this notion that we can define Christianity in terms of a person's life style, or politics, or ethical views on issues like abortion or homosexuality. Is that not always the temptation to take the gospel and turn into the law?

Several years ago I saw the Broadway play, "The Crucible," which was written by Arthur Miller and starred Liam Nesson. It was a chilling account of what happened in Salem, Massachusetts, in a frenzy of religious fanaticism and fear where dozens of women were tried and executed for being witches. It is a reminder too that in a war against terrorism it is very easy to forget some of the basic things we are fighting for, as events in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo have reminded us.

#### IV.

In the third place, our conviction about the centrality of God's revelation in Jesus Christ is also the driving force that defines our mission and our understanding of the Christian life.

This past Monday night I attended a worship service commemorating the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., at Friendship Missionary Baptist Church on Beatties Ford Road. The service started at 6:15 p.m., but because of the large number of people who were expected to attend, we were asked to be there at 5:15 p.m... Three white ministers were there (James Howell, Steve Shoemaker and I) who had been asked to speak along with a number of other speakers from the African American community. The service started at 6:15 p.m. and lasted for three hours. (I was glad that our worship services last for fifty-six minutes) There has been a good bit of discussion in our community about the accusation of the "moral sewer" that exists among urban blacks in Charlotte, but I can tell you that I certainly didn't see that at Friendship Baptist. I saw a group of almost two thousand people crowded into a church to worship, praise God, and remember the life of Dr. King.

One of the speakers that evening was Julius Chambers, one of the key attorneys involved in the Swann vs. the Board of Education case in Charlotte that focused on equity in the public schools. He told about coming to Charlotte forty years ago and finding one of the most segregated cities he had ever seen in his life. At one point he spoke of meeting with Judge James McMillan, a federal judge, who was an elder in this church. He showed Judge McMillan the data from the test results of the black schools and asked Judge McMillan whether he thought that the inequity in these scores pointed to the inferiority of a group of people or whether it was the result

of a legal and educational system that intentionally oppressed black children. The result of that case was the desegregation of our schools and later forced busing.

But as sad as it was to recall some of the events of those dark days in Charlotte, it was not nearly as sad as hearing Julius Chambers say that this past Sunday he had met with school officials to review the tests of the black students in our schools today, and that in forty years the scores had not really changed.

You know, I was under the impression that we had made great strides here in Charlotte in terms of education, but I guess the view from Myers Park and Eastover is a good bit different from the view in West Charlotte.

I think that the Harvard University Dean that spoke to Peter Gomes had a point. If the city of Charlotte were going to be rebuilt, it would be hard to imagine that the Presbyterians would be able to afford to buy two city blocks in the heart of the city. But we are here, and we do not plan to move.

I am convinced that God has placed us here to be a beacon of light in the darkness of our city and our world! Thanks be to God.

Amen