

PAUL IN ATHENS: A CAMEO SCENE IN A MANY-ACT PLAY

HOW FAITH COMES SOMETIMES, AND SOMETIMES IT DOESN'T

The next scene to look at, after Northern Greece, that is, Macedonia (Thessalonica and Philippi), is **Athens**.

Paul himself never mentions being in Athens or preaching there, and he wrote no letter to the Athenians.

Luke, in Acts, 17, 16-34, writes of a visit of Paul to Athens and of some preaching from him there. In Acts Paul is on the way south from Macedonia to Achaia, and it is natural to think that his travel plan, and indeed his curiosity, would take him through Athens. Luke in Acts seemingly wants his Paul to make an impact in Athens. But Paul fails in Athens. Athens rejects his message, and so he rejects Athens, and moves on to Corinth. As a result, in most Pauline commentaries, the Corinthians – a tough lot - paradoxically come through as ‘good’ (because receiving Paul’s message) while the Athenians – a sophisticated lot - come through as ‘bad’ (because not receiving it). This probably reflects attitudes of the second century Christian communities: most of their members were more like Corinthians than Athenians! But it raises questions about who gets the gift of faith and who doesn’t. And even more questions about how

faith is presented to people, in such a way that they accept it and not reject it. This has had an impact on the practice of evangelization in the church down the centuries. It is a very good question for today.

But perhaps, even probably, Paul was never in Athens at all! Acts is a message in the form of a story.... We are meant to hear the message, not necessarily take the story as fact.



The Ancient Agora of Athens

THE PLACE: ATHENS

Athens is ‘the’ classical centre of ancient Greece. It is pagan – in the sense that it worships many gods. It has many temples, many sacrifices, to many idols. There was in Athens – at the time of the writing of Acts – a nervously devout populace frequenting ubiquitous religious shrines. There were new gods introduced to the people all the time, and they were thirsting for anything new and

different, especially in the 'gods' department. Whatever was offered to the people needed to seem to be 'Greek' and to fit into their cultural practice, to be accepted in Athens. Socrates himself had been charged with promoting foreign gods that did not seem to be 'Greek'. There was no interest, for example, in the God of Israel – a strange, foreign god. Anything that had links with Israel would be hard to 'sell' in Athens.

The Agora was just northwest of the Acropolis – literally the city or field of Ares – which was the administrative and commercial 'business district'. There were **philosophers** of famous schools in open dialogue in the Agora of Athens. There you literally 'traded' ideas as you bought material things at the market. The chief philosophical schools at large there at that time were Epicureans and Stoics. Both originated in 4th century (bce) Greece and were still an active force in the first century ce. The Epicureans opposed superstitions of the ordinary people, and held that the gods were unaffected by human manoeuvres, whatever they were (prayers, sacrifices, etc). They thought that sort of 'people's religion' wasn't real religion at all. The Stoics believed in the unity of humanity, and in the natural kinship of humanity with God.

In the midst of this pluralistic (popular) and critical (philosophical) environment there was a recognition that there was an element of **'not-knowing'** when humans thought about the gods. We were all in the last analysis 'ignorant' and 'unknowing' about the gods, and so there were shrines to **'the unknown god'**. Many would have agreed that up till then the 'true' god remained unknown. Many would have thought that the 'true' god would always remain unknown. Many would have called this conviction 'wisdom'. They didn't want it otherwise.

LUKE'S PAUL IN ATHENS

Luke's Paul, in Acts, at Athens, runs immediately into the danger of being in Socrates' position, and seeming to promote a foreign god. He diverts that charge by having recourse to the **apophatic** (cloud of unknowing) persuasion of the Athenians, namely, that 'ignorance' and 'unknowing' of god was a legitimate and honored option among them, and that they actually had a shrine to the 'unknown God'. He claimed that the God he presented to them was this god to whom they already had devotion. So far so good.....but Paul can't honestly leave the matter there.

When, on the basis of that introduction, he moved on to his intended point, namely, the **resurrection of Jesus**, they interrupted him and turned away from him. They did not press charges against him, and there was no conviction laid on him, probably because they thought he was insignificant and stupid. But they spoke critically about him, and called him a 'babbler', a 'seed-picker', a 'browsing bird' (spermologos), and they facetiously took his Greek word for resurrection, Anastasis, to be the name of a female consort of the new (and foreign) god Jesus. They **did not want to know about a god who really raised humans from the dead, or about a human who was presented as a god for really rising from the dead.** In a real sense, Paul's message was too full of light about the real life of the real God than the Athenians could cope with: they preferred their many gods, and the dark 'wisdom' of their unknowing.

As a result, Paul had no one to talk to, and he had nothing to say to them anyway! As a result he moved on to **Corinth**....And in Corinth he did not worry about the niceties of philosophical or religious argument at all. He just told them directly about Jesus crucified-risen. Somehow the wharfies and prostitutes around the docks of Corinth heard what Paul was saying...without the philosophical and religious introduction! Their real life prepared them for the real message....!

Pauline scholarship as a result has always advocated **‘direct’ proclamation by preaching the crucified-risen Christ, as an immediate appeal to ‘faith’, without the ‘introduction’ or ‘apologetics’**. We shall see that there is real value in this, but under certain conditions...

A PRE-DISPOSITION TO SOME KIND OF FAITH IN ALL OF US

The Athens-scene in Acts is like a cameo piece within a lengthy play or historical novel (the Acts of the Apostles). But the issue it brings to our attention is **the meaning of faith, and how people can come to it**. It is worth looking at that, in itself, and for us now, and it opens up a lot about Paul (to whom we will return). I want to use the opportunity here to ask what faith means, and so to understand Paul’s faith. The contrast between Luke’s cameo of Paul in Athens, and the reality of the historical Paul elsewhere, brings out a lot about faith and its meaning.

What is faith? Who has it? Only some people? Everyone?

It is actually **natural** for everyone to believe, to hold for true, to adhere to a truth that holds you and makes you be. Your awareness of this can seem to land on you from out of the blue, but afterwards you feel it has been deep inside you as long as you have lived. If people could get in touch with the deepest levels of their selves, they would discover that they were believers all along. We are all made to be believers....naturally. We can’t be our true selves without believing....without faith.

This believing is an **oceanic feeling of connectedness**. Connectedness. The basic ‘connection’ we look for, is between our own ego and the ‘world’ that is around it. It is an intimate union of ego-self and the surrounding world. It brings a real sense of security. After a while, we come to a sense that we have given up, lost, or need to give up and lose a self that would try to be adequate on its own, in favor of a self-in-the environs, environs which seem like an envelope that include the self happily. It is that experience that is the basis of faith, and that we can rightly call faith.

It is very like the attitude of a **new-born**. Boundaries are not yet established between neonate-ego and the mother’s body. There is no distinct ego yet, there is no different language yet of a new speaking subject separate from the mother. They are together. It is a sensory thing. It is a fullness. The little one is going to live on, and it feels wonderful. It is a jubilant feeling: the not-yet distinct self is in the not-yet distinct world. Without (too much) fear.

There is indeed a **need for language** to help the little one here. It is the next step. There is a need for the infant to name this feeling of connectedness and freedom, and that will take time. But when the new-born is eventually able to put language on it, the words bring a feeling of all-powerfulness and truth, of certitude, elation and bliss. The new world is ‘mine’! Faith has become ‘my very own faith’! I named it!

How does this languaging of the connectedness come about? We are not born with our own words to say it – our own reserve dictionary, as it were. Eventually we hear the **words of others**. Among the others, there are some whom we respect and revere. They seem to recognize us, to know us, to know how to say who we are, to have the words we want and don’t have. We ‘believe’ them. We identify with them. They are the guarantors that will hold us up. So we use, and adapt, their words. **Our faith depends on their faith!**

This is pre-psychological (or at least pre-Oedipal) and pre-religious. It is an innate need to believe in order to be. It needs to become conscious in our own way, doing what we – uniquely – can with the ‘tradition’ into which we have come. Many church people do not realize this: they behave as if those who do not believe as they do in their church, have no ‘faith’ at all. Faith is very personal, and different in each believer...

MORE THAN THIS: HOW DOES CONSCIOUS PERSONAL FAITH COME TO ANYONE

Conscious personal faith means an eventual taking stock of your whole situation, coming to some awareness of how you got here, of where you fit in, of what it is ‘all about’ for you. You have grown enough to know not just that you have to believe, but that you have to **believe in someone**. We need to say something about that, about that someone...

Conscious faith of this kind doesn’t happen unless someone witnesses it to you, and you trust yourself to that person. The witness has to look ‘ok’: has to look credible. It’s better if there are a number of such people, and they all look as though they believe, not necessarily the same words, but in the same general way. It’s better if they are strong and firm in their own convictions. It’s better if they look as if they have found something different, something new. It’s better if they look as if what they have found has made a decisive and positive difference in their lives. It’s better if their faith looks like a real insight into life itself. But *even then, it doesn’t automatically give you faith.*

They can **invite** you, and **promise** you companionship, and communion, faithfully, as long as you live. They can tell you that some sort of heaven is yours if you believe. But they can’t make you believe. It still doesn’t necessarily follow that you do believe. You can still say, I can’t do that. You can say, if I did, it wouldn’t be me, I’d only be obliging someone. I won’t do it.

You see, faith is something **free**, of your **very own**. It’s free because it is your very own. It’s your very own because it comes out of the place in you where your freedom is born. It is a response, **your response**. It is your response to a someone you’ve never met like that before. It is an engagement – you *choose to engage your very being to this someone*. You let go of resistance, and you know you are a believer in that person. You don’t just believe what you are told, you believe *in* that person. And you believe in God, because **you have met God like that** – God is the person you found, in whom you were able to believe. You believe in Jesus, and you believe in the Church, you believe in all the people God believes in, and often it is without knowing in much detail or with much clarification what all the talk about them really means. You don’t need it. You’ve been there. You believe.

Of course there are many ‘in the church’ who take ‘faith’ for granted and do not have this personal experience of this Someone they really believe in.... The church is not a place where such faith is guaranteed. It is a place where such faith is possible.

FAITH IN A DIRECTLY PROCLAIMED MESSAGE FROM A PERSON INVITING TO A PROGRAM

What if the person you so believe in, invites you to do something, to become active in a new way in a new life-program you never thought of before?

Let's come back to Paul. He was offering Athens a rather unusual kind of faith.

Luke's Paul was offering the Athenians a lived faith, not a new theory about faith. He wanted them to walk with him on the Damascus Road, not shop around in the (philosophical) Agora. For Paul, faith meant a living encounter with the risen Jesus, not a new set of ideas about a new religion. Paul wanted Jesus to rise in them, there, as he had risen in Paul on the Damascus Road. They did not have that kind of faith. The story of Paul in Athens is a lesson given to us about the specialness of faith in resurrection. It is hard enough to have faith in someone you have discovered in your world: but to believe in someone from some other world beyond, from a 'resurrection world', that is a whole lot more....Especially if that someone is a Jew. Particularly if it asks a real change in the way you live now, in your ethics, and in your politics.

Faith is not intellectual assent to a proposition, but vital commitment to a program. It can never be summarized in a proposition. It is not just factual assent or a statement that 'this is so'. It is a total lifestyle commitment, via interactive process – bilaterally – with someone in a shared faithfulness. It is a beginning of a different kind of living, made possible by a new kind of relationship. With a new kind of person. A risen one!

It is not a way of knowing something... *It is right to remove the experience of believing (faith) from the domain of that sort of knowing.* It is not 'knowing', in the ordinary sense of the word. It is not determined by what is believed or by the words about it. It is not primarily looking to what is enunciated as believable. It does not relate to some content of faith. It is not supported by definitions, not directly and immediately dependent on the 'object' of faith (which might be thought capable of scientific expression), not a consequent of a faith-text. Whenever faith is presented like that, you could respond: it is not that. There is no such third-person objectivity about it. It is not an immediate link to that kind of 'real'. The One believed-in cannot be expressed exhaustively at least in positive expressions like that. Rather, all attempts to do so must be erased from what the act of believing really is. The desire to know is wounded by the not-known, by the unable-to-be-known, by the absent, by the Other, by a first-person unable to become a third-person, by a definitive lack of that sort of cold presence. When you are invited to faith, you are invited to relate to someone who is there in a way you never 'knew' and will never 'know'. Yes, it is a pity that church theologies have turned the first person into a vague third person!

Faith is a different manner of being for a human. It is a practice, an art of living differently. It makes the believer able to receive another order of being, and makes the subject free for life in that new order.

Faith is like falling in love. It is really prayer, invocation, a speaking-to not a speaking-of or about, a response to a hearing, to a voice, not a statement. There is something quite irreducible about it. It is a new art of hearing. It is literally moving to a place where one does not 'know' the place.

It is the language of dispossession not of total-mastery. In the experience of faith, there is recognition by the believer that his/her faith-act is recognised by others who believe, in a community of believers.

It includes, specially, a spiritual commitment to the place of the tragic in human life, and an awareness that it is not finally tragic any more. It is sensing that the person you believe in is bigger than the traumas you are in and can be in. In Christian terms, it is letting your own tragic things be touched by the power of resurrection, by the risen one rising in you.

There is a weakness in this believing, because the **mystery** of it is not your own. You did not come to that mystery because you wanted to. It came to you because it wanted to. That is its singular originality. But faith is not a kind of weak variant between trust and knowledge. It is not an opinion. But it has a ‘faiblesse’ all its own, that cannot ever be overcome. It is like a receiving of something quite other than a totally positive result. In Christian faith, this weakness is the stamp of crucifiedness that remains in someone who is rising from the dead but hasn’t fully done it yet.

The Athenians did not come to that kind of faith. In Corinth, in contrast, that kind of faith came to the most unlikely recipients.

SPECIFICALLY: FAITH IN THE PERSON OF THE RISEN JESUS AND IN HIS ‘PROGRAM’ OF CRUCIFIED-RISENNESS

But is faith in Christ even more than the ‘PERSONAL FAITH’ I have been talking about? Yes. It is.

There is an expression (the historical) Paul uses: ‘**faith of Christ**’ (Greek: *pistis Christou*). We read it, for example, in Galatians 2, 16-20, and in Philippians 3, 9. There have always been arguments among the commentators about its real sense. Does it mean that ‘Christ’ is the object of our faith – so that we believe in him and what he says, and he is the central tenet or core object of our faith? [Yes, we do believe that, but is it the heart of the matter?] Does it mean that Christ himself had faith, experienced faith, came to faith, and that we need to do something like he did in coming to the experience of faith ourselves? [Wait a minute: did Jesus have faith? And I couldn’t have faith the way he did, could I?] In brief, do we read the phrase ‘faith of Christ’ objectively or subjectively?

Reform traditions have generally taken the phrase objectively, to mean that Christ is the one object of faith that can bring us to justification.

Catholic traditions have generally agreed, mostly because Catholic theology usually did not think that Jesus had personal faith – Catholic theology usually said that he had the beatific vision even during his earthly life (perhaps from its inception). All these traditions have moved a bit lately, and there are many scholars now who incline to think that Paul was actually speaking of a ‘faith’ or ‘fidelity’ in Jesus himself.

Recently, some eminent Dominican Thomists (such as Torrell) have sustained that *Jesus did not have the beatific vision at all until after his death and resurrection*. It is more real to think in this way, and perhaps more in line with the gospels as we now understand them, and as they speak of the pre-Easter Jesus. Torrell has also re-interpreted the quasi-angelic infused knowledge that the (Thomistic) tradition has claimed for Jesus, and, while he still accepts an infused knowledge for him, he has made it the *kind of infused knowledge that God gave the Jewish prophets of old*. To sum up, this makes Jesus much less like a heavenly, glorified being ‘appearing’ among us, and much more like a real Jewish prophet finding his earthly way in a truly historical (and Jewish) existence. Naturally, this gives a much **greater role to the acquired knowledge** of Jesus, and to an emotional life that flows from it. It leaves room for real faith in Jesus.

Most Thomists have now followed this new direction. Bonino (editor of *Revue Thomiste*) has indicated his agreement. In this they have joined with theologians from other schools of thought, who have been more directly influenced by biblical and historical studies of Jesus. The opinion in favour of the beatific and angelic-type knowledge for the historical Jesus is now that of an increasingly small minority among theologians. Almost all theologians now suggest that Aquinas was too much influenced by Augustine and the tradition, and, like Augustine, did not know a critical approach to scripture, which might have released him from the constraints of the tradition.

Jesus is seen as a Jewish prophet who had to learn by the road of experience, and who felt things deeply in his sensitivity. There is surely a greater humanness in him than the subordinated and diluted humanness that the ancient tradition thought it had to maintain about his intellectual and emotional life. Biblical and historical studies have shown that he was much more one of us than that.

To return to the meaning of Paul's phrase, the 'faith of Christ'. Part of the difficulty lies in modern English. In modern English, the word 'faith' can mean many things. It can mean belief, it can mean trust. And it can mean someone's 'faithfulness' – their 'reliability' or 'trustworthiness'. The Greek phrase Paul uses is open to any and all of these nuances. The context in which he uses it is equally an open one. There is really no need to make an exclusive choice – all the shades of meaning can be kept together. It is of course true that the act of believing (in some doctrine or in some other person) is never ascribed to Jesus by Paul, or indeed in the whole New Testament. It is also true that Jesus is presented throughout the New Testament and particularly by Paul as a trustworthy person of real fidelity, not only to God but very much also to the poor of God, and indeed to us. It is that that makes him a person to be believed in, in a special way.

The resurrection of Jesus is central here. What we believe in, when we have faith in Christ, is his resurrection from the dead. We see his fidelity to God especially in his 'hanging in there' on the cross, 'believing' in God's action of raising him out of this death into God's own life. Sometimes we like to speak of that as his 'obedience' (as the celebrated hymn of Phil 2 does). But we could also, I think, call it his 'believing', his 'trusting', his 'faithing' in the God who raises up... Paul seems to me to have had thoughts like that.

We are really asked to, given the grace to, believe in precisely THAT.

Personally, I like to take this point further, but in a way that seems to me what Paul meant. . I like to wonder how a crucified person keeps on relating to God to the point where God makes this crucified one a crucified-Risen one? I like to think this is the core of it all, for Jesus, and for us too in our dying. I like to think this is the real 'object' of any Christian faith. I like to think that the 'experience of faith' for us is the experience of doing this, a sharing in the way Jesus experienced it. It is only in and through that 'faith' that God can 'apocalypt' (reveal – manifest) his Son in Jesus and in us. We can become fully filial only through that and in that, through Jesus and in Him. This is in other terms the sine qua non of 'justification', too.

I think at times that we have not realized this enough. We have traded with a theological division of virtues, into faith, hope and charity, and tried to define the particularity of faith vis-à-vis the other two. That tends to turn the focus away from the interior openness of Jesus crucified to resurrection, and from the interior openness of all suffering people to resurrection (even if they have never heard the word). We have indeed in more recent times used a more 'personalist' approach to faith, and we have seen it as faith in the person of Jesus, but we have not taken it to

this point and seen that you have to be suffering (dying) to have faith and that only in that experience can you exhibit an openness that gives you your share in the resurrectedness of Jesus. Perhaps, to press the point, we might say that you have to be crucified for your commitment to the poor to have faith, and that your faith will be an awareness of and a sharing in God's 'faith' in those same poor!

I think that a realization of this might change our attitude to 'communicating faith', or 'evangelization'. **The question is: have we done too much proclaiming outside the experience of suffering in the people who hear us?** They might hear what we are saying (in our words) but they aren't at the point where they can hear a positive God saying it to them in the heart of their pain. How can we help them get to that point?

To see how, let us come back to Paul in Athens.

A CRISIS IN TACTICS FOR EVANGELIZATION

It is important to realize, in reading from Acts the story of Paul in Athens, that we are not listening to the real Paul speaking to an actual, Gentile, sophisticated pagan audience. We are reading Luke, much later, perhaps even in the late first or early second century, writing to his readers about the great opportunity for mission that initially existed in the Hellenistic intelligentsia (focused in 'Athens'), and about the immense stumbling block their 'wisdom' was to real faith in the gospel. It would have been wonderful had they believed Paul: it would have put into much bigger perspective everything their culture already gave them. They didn't – couldn't – believe Paul. They didn't – couldn't – even understand what he was saying. They certainly didn't – and couldn't - believe in resurrection, and they did not want to share in it in and through their suffering... For Luke, this is a massive opportunity lost.

Why didn't it work?

Paul, I think, might have been trying to do too much at once. He had several aims. He saw the Athenians living in idolatry, and he tried to turn them away from their idols. He saw them living in mental confusion and ignorance, and he tried to give them a sense of truth that only faith would provide. He saw them as polytheists, with many gods, and he tried to convince them that there was only one God – and that this God was unknown to them. He tried to lead them through a 'natural theology' of good arguments that monotheism was imposed on all thinking people. He then also tried to impart a sense of Jesus and of his resurrection, and to give people a real faith in Jesus, who as Risen will bring them a share in his own resurrection. Although it is clear that for Paul himself, **Jesus risen and rising in our sufferings is the one and only real centre of attention**, the Athenians heard it as just one more item in a larger agenda, and perhaps not the immediate one, perhaps rather a footnote to what they thought was the core of Paul's message.

There is a large difference then between this Paul of Acts, as Luke portrays him in Athens, and the historical Paul, captured by his encounter with the dynamism of resurrection, and sent more and more into the pain of people to discover his and their ongoing resurrection.

These are **issues for apologetics and for the proclamation of the gospel** in the church today, questions about the kind of evangelization we do. Are we aiming more at moral conversion, or apologetics, or orthodoxy, or personal relationship, than at a personal conviction that a Living God is lifting us through our dying into God's own undying life? If we say that the latter point is

included in what we preach, is it the one and only central point of what we preach? Are we doing a kerygma because we like the experience of ‘proclaiming something’, or are we conscious enough of the extraordinary nature of what we proclaim, of the core of the kerygma – namely, the inner transformation of our suffering and dying that God is working in us through Jesus crucified and risen? Is our kerygma a death-therapy for the people at large?

Please note that Luke’s problematic is typical of the second century Christian one. Something of the urgent immediacy of Christ-in-Paul was missing in it. If Paul ever used natural theology, it was to convict sinful humanity of its sinfulness and show them how far they were from resurrection – he did that in the early chapters of Romans. Here we are reading Luke, not hearing Paul, and Luke is using a dramatic make-up scene to illustrate something about those issues of apologetics and evangelization.

But it is not just Luke and not just second century. This tactic in evangelization has continued down the centuries. It is around now. In the light of the real Paul, it must be questioned.

There is a trend today to drop preliminaries like natural theology or moral exhortation, etc., as a threshold to the gospel, and simply proclaim directly the fact of the resurrection of Jesus. I think Paul would not be fully happy with that, either. Paul saw the context of faith as our suffering, not our capacity to be overwhelmed and/or convinced by strong proclamation, or told something that is paradoxically right and so holding our attention. He would, I think, want us to experience in and through our suffering (especially the suffering that comes from giving ourselves in love to others) something of the acting of God in raising Jesus and all suffering people from death into divine life. Perhaps we do not speak enough into people’s experience of suffering and show them what is deeply going on there.

A NEW SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

What I have tried to bring to the surface here, is a new understanding of faith itself (and so of evangelization too). A lot of people claim to have faith, but it is not this faith. There are others who have this experience, but have never been told that the word for it is faith. I am suggesting that Paul had this faith...

Within the new spiritual experience is a different understanding of God. It is not so much a search for God as a marveling at the fact that God has already found us. Jesus did not search for God – Jesus wondered at the sense of being flooded by God through his suffering into new life. Contemporary deep experience is actually feeling a similar thing. People are beginning to know that ‘seeking’ God is not the right way to describe where they are now at. God has already sought them, and has found them, in and through the simplicities of the everyday-now, in and through the suffering that comes to them through their ongoing fidelity to those they love. Something remarkable has happened in our time. The ‘feel’ of God has changed.

I don’t want to move from the focus, mentioned above, on suffering, on dying, on ‘being crucified’ for your commitment to God’s poor. It is all that. But in it, there is also a strange joy. A joy you don’t get without that. It is connected with this new ‘feel’ of God.

You could speak of this God as the God who is Joy. This is a different quality of experience from what has been typical of Christian life for a long time. I do not mean the joy that is the binary

opposite of sadness. I mean a God-Joy that transcends that whole couplet of experiences. It was for Paul part of the Damascus experience. That is why it is there, especially in our sufferings....

We need to discover that God is incredibly happy at the sight of people who get in touch with other people's pain, and stay with them till they know together the transformation of that pain into the fullness of resurrection. God loves the rising from the dead.

There really isn't any 'good news' outside of that depth of suffering to the point of a different Joy and a different God.

SPEAKING INTO AND THROUGH SUFFERING

Why is there value in leading someone to a sense of the risen Jesus, through the path of their own suffering? Why is this more 'effective' than a rhetorical outline of the 'case for Jesus'? Why is there much more in the historical Paul (say, of Corinth) than in the Athenian Paul of Luke?

It seems to me that in all significant suffering, there is an experience of an **impasse**. The person cannot make sense of it, and cannot manage it. This is the real source of **anxiety** – anxiety of a special kind created by the impasse of suffering. At this moment, the suffering person is trying to find a harmony – is groaning for it in Paul's term – between suffering and healing, between brokenness and peaceful integrity. The person wonders – rightly I think – if healing is even possible, if the impasse doesn't prove that no abiding peace is possible. What is sought here is **interpretation**. Suffering people ask that of doctors, nurses, counselors, relatives, pastoral workers, priests. All the answers they get are culturally conditioned.

I think we could say that there is a **symbolic surcharge** in all the interpretations. Recourse is had to some prevailing **cultural myths**. The myths are then asked to do things they were not originally intended for. Somehow the person 'knows' this, and doesn't believe them! I suggest this is the source of the **peculiar depression** such people experience. They are beyond satisfying interpretations of their condition. It is also perhaps the last act of courtesy they do, when they don't have a row with these people who are so far away from what is going on inside them.

From a religious point of view, this changes the attitude to **God**. Even God doesn't have an answer to this – or an interpretation! God may be alongside the person, but God seemingly can't take away the problem or explain it....God doesn't have a peace and freedom from suffering to give the person....

Paul, if I may put his thought into my words, seems to say that **a suffering-person is like the crucified-Jesus**. For Jesus, as Paul sees him, suffering is only half the reality: Jesus is the suffering-risen one. Paul would want to say to a suffering person, you are actually rising from the dead in this suffering, and it won't go away, but it will write traits into you that will go with you into risen life. For Paul, there is no impasse. There need be no anxiety. There is no interpretation needed or possible from the binary world we live in. There is no God who has to make a choice between healing this person and not healing this person. There is only the God of Jesus who raises suffering people in and through their suffering...

This is how I see the Athenian Paul getting it so wrong... in terms of the historical Paul, and in terms of effective evangelization. You have to work within the experience of suffering to give

people 'good news', that is, news that is outside the impasses of the binary world and so ultimately new and good.

But I think Paul would ask for a little more. He would not see himself as a neutral counselor beside the suffering person. He would want to **enter into the experience of their suffering**, and perhaps when they resisted him, learning something of their suffering in his own experience. It is really in that shared experience that we have the privileged point of access to the 'rising'.

Everyone suffers. That is why everyone is called and guided into resurrection. That is really why Gentiles and Jews together will discover one another in their rising from the dead.

This doesn't happen in the Athens cameo. But we will see it happening more and more as we follow Paul onwards to Corinth and beyond...

BACK TO PAUL AND HIS PROBLEM AT ATHENS

THE MEANING AND ROLE OF CHARISMS

This might be a good moment to say a word about charisms. Paul met them often, even if in the story of his time in Athens he did not meet them at all.

He believed that the kingdom of God was now coming very soon, closer than even Jesus and John the Baptist had consciously thought and hoped. He was confirmed in this, because he also saw evidence of its coming in many of his Gentile converts. He saw that they were given the Spirit (with charismatic gifts). He always saw the Spirit as more important than the gifts of the Spirit. Spirit is a real energy, a dynamism that changes the identity and character of people. Charismata were a mystery to people at that time, and indicated some special divine presence and activity.

I see it as unfortunate that in the past few decades, when there has been a revival of awareness of charisms, there has been too much focus on Pentecost charisms, as mentioned in the early part of Acts. For the historical Paul, a charism could be said to be **a special and manifest way of participating in the crucified-risenness of Jesus. It is a way of carrying in our bodily historical existence the death state (nekrosis) of Jesus, so that the risen life state (zoe) of Jesus be more manifest in us.**

From our look at the place of suffering in faith (above), I think we could see that **every significant new suffering in human life is itself a real charism.** Any other so called charisms must be secondary to that, and in support of that. Like evangelization, a charismatic life must come out of and lead into a deeper experience of suffering as the only real entrée into the resurrection of the crucified.

There were consequences for Paul's thinking about his converts and their charisms.

With the Spirit and the charisms, Paul's converts were not just 'pure', they were no longer 'common', and indeed they were positively 'holy' (sanctified: hagios, kodesh). That means that God was giving them entrée to the divine presence in its most sacred locations, such as the inner sanctum of the temple.

Paul saw this, and re-read the prophets in the Jewish scriptures, where it is said that when this happens the end of everything is on the doorstep. As a result of the Spirit in them, these Gentile

Christians are immediately prepared for the end of everything as it used to be. They are looking into something radically new.

They are already set aside by God from other ‘ordinary-common’ Gentiles (pagans). They were suited to the zone of holiness represented by the Jerusalem temple. In other words, we are not dealing simply with random gifts of the Spirit to individuals. The temple, the holy of holies in it, the ritual space of the temple, were expanded by God into all these suffering people, wherever they were. The Greek-Roman universe itself, where these people lived, became an extension of the temple precincts. The universe of suffering of all people, Jew and Gentile, was indeed the new temple. [Remember that in the whole lifetime of Paul, the temple in Jerusalem stood.] In this light, Paul saw that the idols are useless, and the only things to do with them was bury them! [Paul not only takes on the Roman Empire as a false religion, he imagines and dreams of a transformed Roman Empire internally changed by the presence and behavior of his inspired converts. He would also, I think, have imagined a transformed world of suffering changed by the immediacy of resurrection life.]

An inspired Gentile Christian could still – theoretically at least - sin. It was not sin against the Jewish Torah. It was sin against the gift of holiness given to him or her in this Spirit way. Jews had a concept of sin, and used temple blood sacrifices to remove it. Pagan Gentiles had a concept of ‘sin’ against one of the lower gods, or idols, and then they used some form of pagan sacrifice, in a pagan temple, to remove that sin. Note that Paul’s inspired gentiles did not use either the Jewish temple rituals, nor the pagan ones, for this purpose. They had a real reconciliation with the expanding God who was present among them in their Christian community and especially in their suffering.

I think Paul saw evangelization more and more in terms of entering into other people’s suffering and leading it to the onrushing gift of resurrection. I think he also saw what we would call ‘health care’ (or ‘palliative care’) not so much as care of the body that used to be healthier, or care of a person so as to eliminate as much discomfort as possible, but as care of someone entering soon into that same on rushing gift of resurrection. Preachers and nurses could learn a lot from Paul.

But in Athens – he found no charisms, he found no real faith, he found no sense of imminent resurrection...He himself would have to suffer more himself, and learn slowly what the ‘name of the game’ really was...

S0 – WHAT DO WE MAKE OF LUKE’S CAMEO PIECE ABOUT ATHENS?

We don’t write it off, and almost dismiss it as not worthy of a place in the Pauline canon because not ‘really’ inspired! No. Luke teaches us something important through it. He teaches us that a certain style of grandiose preaching (rational, or what we used to call ‘kerygmatic’) didn’t work in Athens and most likely won’t really work anywhere. He uses the story to put us off a wrong track. What is the right track? We don’t get that from Luke in Acts. We have to travel with Paul himself as he finds out, step by step, very slowly. I think the first major step, as Luke himself saw, was Corinth.

See P.Royannais, Michel de Certeau: l'anthropologie du croire et la theologie de la faiblesse de croire, RsR 2003 499-533.

Nicolas Grimaldi, Le livre de Judas, Paris, PUF 2006

The alchemy of credence changes into an object of experience an ideal which exceeds all possible experience. It renders representable what exceeds all possible representation. It is the property of credence to change the universal ideal of reason (the Sovereign Good) into a particular ideal of the imagination (the Promised Land). In a way, it fetishizes the absolute. To become reconciled to it, it offers sacrifices.

B.Duroux, La psychologie de la foi chez saint Thomas d'Aquin, Tournai, 1963.

S.Zizek, The Universal Exception, London, Continuum, 2007.

'Who in fact are fundamentalists? To put it simply, a fundamentalist does not believe in something, but rather knows it directly. In other words, both liberal-sceptical cynicism and fundamentalism share a basic underlying feature: the loss of the ability to believe in the proper sense of the term. For both of them, religious statements are quasi-empirical statements of direct knowledge: fundamentalists accept these statements as such, while skeptics mock them. What is unthinkable for both is the 'absurd' act of a decision which installs every authentic belief, a decision that cannot be grounded in the claim of reason, in positive knowledge.' (pp 308-309).
