

Where To Start

I once went on a visit with a pastor in Sydney who had to go to see a lady in hospital. I think it is fair to say that this lady was a very eccentric and rather difficult customer. She was a bitter and angry person who had been through a lot in her life, probably much more than anybody knew. She had lots of views and opinions about Christianity that were quite off-beam: All pastors and clergy were fundamentally untrustworthy. The Bible is fairytales. All churches are powerful wealthy institutions that oppress the poor etc. She told us she believed in reincarnation and was very interested in Eastern sects.

I was cringing inside, as I wondered how this pastor was going to handle it. He can't just let her say these defamatory things! How was he going to challenge her and put her straight? How was he going to refute her wild assertions and her way-out religious ideas?

I watched and listened. To my amazement he didn't even try. He just listened and nodded slightly, made comments every now and again. After a while, quietly, without any reference to her opinions and without becoming defensive, he asked her about her life, her struggles and her illness.

As she began to open up, he gently invited her to share her fears and her worries about the future, her son and his broken marriage, her home and how she would manage there after she recovered.

Finally, he asked if she would like him to pray for Jesus to help her.

She began to cry at this point, as he held her hand and prayed for her.

This pastor explained to me afterwards: *I could see there was no way she was going to walk across the bridge to me, so I just had to walk across the bridge to her.*

I learned a lot that day.

Clearly there was a lot this lady needed to get straightened out about, and a lot she perhaps needed to learn about our Christian teaching and our church. But it is no good trying to share our faith by starting where *we* are. You have to *start* where the other person is. A life time of pain and hardship had made her angry and she was deeply scarred and in need of healing. The pastor could see that *this* was where he needed to start.

That's what Paul is doing in this reading. He realizes that he has to start where his hearers are. But he learns this *the hard way*, as we see if we go back, earlier in

chapter 17 and see what happens when Paul first arrives in Athens. Luke tells us he sees all the pagan temples and idols of the Athenians and is very upset by all this idolatry. In verse 16 we see what happens the very first time he tries to proclaim the Gospel in Athens, in the market place. Things do not go so well. He tries to confront all this pagan religion head-on, without understanding what was really going on, trying to start where *he* was. The people who heard him said, in verse 18, 'Who is this babbler? He seems to be talking about foreign gods'.

Finally some of those who had heard him took him to the Areopagus, the place in Athens where all the latest religious ideas were discussed and debated, and said 'Paul, what you are talking about sounds very strange to us. What do you really mean? Explain yourself.'

This is the moment where Paul realizes he needs a change of approach; that he could not start *where he was*, but had to start *where they were*.

In verses 22-31, we see that Paul starts again with the Athenians. He opens his eyes to what was going on spiritually in the city and he finds the 'altar to an unknown god'. The connection he makes here with his hearers, by talking about this altar, is absolutely brilliant. He is not playing a cheap trick to get his sermon off to a appealing start. This empty altar, he realized, showed the deep need of his hearers. This was the bridge he needed to cross to get to them. It showed that even with all the other idols and religious shrines in the city of Athens, the Athenians still felt somehow that spiritually they were missing something; all their man-made gods somehow were not enough. This altar with its inscription showed Paul that they knew there was more to all than their idols and shrines; they sensed that there was a God they could not name and whom did not know. So Paul spoke into that space where this empty stood, to the need of a people who were, as he says later (verse 27), groping around in the darkness, not knowing who they were looking for. He says to them "What you worship as unknown, I am going to proclaim to you". Then, as we heard, from that starting point, standing on the same ground with his hearers, he began to introduce to them the living God.

Clearly Paul realizes in this, his first speech in the Areopagus, that he cannot bring the whole counsel of God to these Athenians in one sermon. He speaks about the God who lives above and beyond all earthly shrines and temples, who needs nothing from mortals, who, on the contrary, created everything and provides everything for them; a God who holds all people accountable and will finally judge them, through a man he has designated. Notice anything missing from this sermon? A particular name? The name of the man crucified for the sin of all people?

That's right, Paul does not mention Jesus. Nor does he talk about his redemption of sinners. Nor does he talk about the forgiveness of sins – all very central and important points – for his next speech. He has realized that he must start where his

hearers are, and work toward his proclamation of Jesus Christ, not all in one leap, but step by step. We know that he did this, and, Luke tells us later in verse 34, a group of Athenians became believers in Jesus.

He started where they were and brought them to Jesus. And this is what we need to do too. I know many of you would like to influence people you love with the Gospel of Jesus Christ – family, adult children and grandchildren, friends.

But it is highly unlikely that they will cross the bridge to us, so we need to cross the bridge to them, Like Paul.

Paul shows love and respect. He reaches out. He takes a risk. He sees the need. He speaks in terms his hearers can understand.

You start where the person is. You spend time and listen to what they share with you, not just talk about what you want to share with them! The time may well come when, as with Paul here, they say to you ‘Explain this faith thing to me’, because they sense in you the unknown God they would like to know. That is why it is very important that we are ready to give an account, as Peter says in today’s epistle, for the hope that is in us.

It is usually not a matter of it all happening in one conversation, but more commonly over weeks, months, even years.

That pastor I went visiting with many years ago went back to visit that strange angry lady many times I believe, as she became older and more unwell. He had to cross over that bridge many times, to reach her where she was. He waited and listened and watched with compassion and patience, not just bringing Jesus to her but being Jesus to her, where she was.

Let me leave you with a question to ponder further. What bridge is God calling *you* to cross to make known the God you know, to somebody you know?