In John’s Gospel, Jesus is pointing ahead to the future, a future after he has died and risen from the grave, a future where the Holy Spirit has come and fallen on his disciples and become the heartbeat of the living Church- and in Acts, Luke and Paul are showing us what the future looks like, how it will feel. It is a thrilling and dizzying pair of readings. This is how the future will be. The future is now.

Jesus is talking to his disciples gathered in the upper room on Maundy Thursday, the night of his arrest. As John organises things, he is using these last moments together to issue his Farewell Discourse, to give them a map for all that is to come. When he says keep my commandments he is being big-picture- do everything we have talked about, everything you have seen, everything we have shared- and he is talking about the way in which he summarises the law- Love God with everything you have and love your neighbour as yourself- and he is talking about the new commandments he has given them this very night- You must be the servant of all as I have been by washing your feet. Share bread and wine like this to remember me. If you love me you will do all of these things. And I will not leave you alone on this hostile planet- the Spirit of all Truth will come, which is to say, I will come to you again. I will not leave you orphaned, I am coming to you, Jesus says- which is a beautiful phrase, full of understanding and promise. I will come to you. Keep my commandments and the Father and I will send the Spirit of Truth. I will not leave you orphaned- I am coming to you. Keep my commandments.

And what that looks like is Paul standing in the Aeropagus bearing witness to Jesus. He has travelled to Athens, to the very heart of Greek culture, society and philosophy. You could argue that Athens is the most influential city in Western civilisation because of the way its ideas shaped Roman culture, art, ideas. He is standing in New York in 1990, in London in 1870. He has been readying himself for this moment for years, travelling through Greek cities, living in Greek society, learning, listening, understanding. And what he delivers, presumably shortened by Luke somewhat, is a speech which is a model of how we should engage with society and a blueprint for how we, as proud Liberal Anglicans, should engage with the world.

Paul is deeply engaged with and in the world he is talking to. What he says is tailored for his hearers and his moment. He does not turn up in Athens and give the same speech he gave in Corinth, and Ephesus and Antioch and Jerusalem. He has just been in Thessalonika, speaking to a small group of Jews in a synagogue there. This is not what he said to them. This is the speech for these people in this place and moment. He has been talking, engaging, debating and some of his hearers bring him to the centre of philosophical life in the city and say “Tell us more.” So he does- and boy, does he. He comes at them like a whirlwind- by talking a language they know. It is their territory, their turf. He starts from the Altar to the Unknown God- and he says, provocatively, that that God is known and that Paul is his servant. He is taking the things they know and claiming it all for Jesus. He is finding common ground and then saying that it is all Jesus. He is standing at the heart of an enormous and hallowed city and saying that all of the temples they can see behind him- even the Parthenon- are empty vessels. He is taking on the Epicurean philosophers he has just been debating with saying “God is here. He cares about the world he made very much. He became flesh.” He is saying to the Stoics he has also been debating with “God is real. He is not just in inner spark. People touched Jesus. He bled and died on the cross.” Your ideas of a distant god who does not love us or care for us are wrong. Your ideas of a vague and inconsequential god are wrong. Your buildings are empty of life. You speak of an unknown god who is the very opposite of that. God can be known. He is as he is in Jesus Christ, a human being like you but also divine.

It is little surprise that some people walk away, as we hear in the verses after today’s reading. But the way he engages with Athens and Hellenistic culture is less impressive and less inspiring than the way Paul himself has already engaged with Jesus and the Spirit of Truth. The biggest wonder here is that Paul is in Athens at all, speaking of all people as being one. This is an immense change in the belief he grew up with that the Jews are God’s special, chosen people. God has been at work in Paul and now he longs for God to be at work in the Greeks he is addressing in the full light of the sun in the heart of Athens. And some listen- verse 34 says “Some men stayed with him and had faith, among them Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman by the name of Damaris, and others along with them.”

Paul speaks with great power and deep faith to the world in front of him. He bears witness to God’s timeless love in a way which connects and challenges. He comes out of the holy place (Israel, Jerusalem, the Temple) to be incarnational in the world everywhere, because he has come to see that God’s love is for everyone.

Broadly speaking, as Christians in 2023 in England, we have two choices today- to turn our backs on the world around us and to live parallel lives in gathered communities, in effect, or to be like Paul, confidently making an account of our faith, trusting in the Spirit of Truth who longs to inspire and equip us, keeping the commandments as Jesus calls us to. Bearing witness to God’s ongoing revelation by our lives of service and our daily acts of daily love. There are no prizes for guessing that it is the second option which we believe here at St Paul’s to be the better way. Confident of God, inspired by the Spirit of Truth, following in the footsteps of our patron Paul, we are called to be like Jesus in the world. Called to be present and engaged, moment by moment, hand by hand, heart by heart, smile by smile. Called to see where the gaps in people’s lives are and to show how Jesus is the answer to every question. Called to accept and welcome people as Paul does and not meet them with condemnation, wishing that they were other than they are. Called, like Jesus, to love and to be in the world for the good of the world, as he is. Called to trust that the Spirit of truth continues to work, steer, lead, guide, cajole and reveal God’s heart afresh in every generation.

Often we complicate things. Simply, we are St Paul’s Church.

We believe that the Creator God is at work in the world he made and loves always and we need to join in.

We believe that the Spirit of Truth is still active in the world, and we need to listen to what she says, and follow where the wind blows.

We believe that Jesus is the True North we follow, our star ahead of us and our dear companion on the road. Where he leads we must follow. He calls us to keep his commandments to love God with everything we have and are and to love our neighbour as we long to be loved ourselves.

In baptism we know how precious we are to God. In the Eucharist we are reminded of everything Jesus does for us.

And then we are told to go and engage and connect, to live and love and serve, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

May we know, each of us, the transforming power of God at work in our hearts today- and may we take every opportunity that comes our way to bear witness to his great and all-surpassing love, today and every day.