Devotional Easter 6 (During the Covid-19 Pandemic)
*Riffing on Zeus*

“In him we live and move and have our being.” It is one of the most profound and beautiful lines in the New Testament and yet it’s referent is not the God of the Bible, nor the Christ nor Christ’s Spirit.

As best scholars can figure, it’s a fragment of a poem written by Epimenides, a Greek, who lived 700 years before Christ. The poem fragment became immortal because in his address to the Athenians, St. Paul quotes this line as he explains himself and as he seeks to connect his perspective to theirs: “In him we live and move and have our being,” Here’s the amazing bit, Epimenides is referring to Zeus, the God at the head of the Greek pantheon of gods, but Paul uses the line to refer to the one God, the only God.

Paul’s speech in Athens is one of the most important in human history and is probably the premier example of what our second reading has in mind when the author says “Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.” Of course, we just have Luke’s summary here, the bones of the thing as it were, Paul probably waxed on for several hours!

Paul is doing something many Christians have forgotten in this day and age; he’s making the case for Christ by both disagreeing with the idolatry in the society but by also noting that there are hints in their poets and religions that point to message he’s presenting.

I find it unfortunate that the lectionary editors cut out the context within Paul speaks: a pluralist society in which people lived to hear about the latest thing and within which Paul’s message sounded like simply “another” religious offering in a marketplace of religions there not being much space left on the display shelf!

That sounds a lot like our context! A time and a place when all belief systems seem on par and in a religious marketplace where I could swear there are at least 115 different kinds of Jesus on offer not to even begin to speak of other world religions.

By the way, 115 is just a #, an exaggeration to make a point; it’s probably more like 130! 😊.

Paul is able to draw something powerful from amongst all the silliness and ignorance, a powerful, deep truth about human lives and our connection to God. Observing and studying his environment carefully Paul discovers an altar to “an unknown god.”

Whether this was simply the Athenian attempt to “cover all bases,” a kind of “politically correct” inclusivism or, more likely actually, an altar built after a pandemic ended because no one was sure which god to credit, it’s almost certain that Paul probably doesn’t know.

Paul uses this altar as a broken signpost on the path towards truth. But a sign with an arrow that says, “this way to God” isn’t that helpful if it’s hanging loosely from the post and you’re not sure which way it was originally pointing!

Broken signpost or not, Paul implies that all humans ask the questions, “why” “how” “what” Many of us don’t do it with much sophistication. We know there’s more to life than money, fame or power and so we, to use Paul’s word “grope” after meaning which is, Paul says, a “groping” after God.

I’m reminded of me trying to the find the bathroom after waking in the middle of the night. We lunge around trying this and that, often compromising with the truth in our searching because we’re looking for answers that don’t demand that much change on our part.

This ignorance of our surroundings, of our own motivations, of even what we’re looking for partly relates to our heritage, to what our parents taught us, to what passes for truth in our circumstances whether politically or religiously.

But human ignorance runs deeper than this and this is is why idolatry of all kinds is such a dead end: the reality that what we’re looking for isn’t another in a series, another item in a collection of facts. Here’s where Paul’s quote is so powerful, “In him we live and move and have our being.”

It’s hard to think of analogies: If we were a sentence in a book, we’re not looking for another sentence, maybe even the perfect sentence that makes sense of our sentence, we’re looking for the book, but we’re in the book so we can never see the book!

If I were a thread in a shirt, I’m not looking for another thread, I’m looking for the garment, but I just don’t have that perspective!

Centuries after this speech, St. Augustine said “Before you felt God, you thought that you could express *God*.” That is, you thought you could describe God as someone, as a larger, more glorious someone. Augustine continues, “But then you began actually to feel Him” that is, in our searching, in our groping after this “something more” we sometimes get honest, we sometimes see clearly, we find that an event happens in which God has reached out to us. Again, Augustine continues, “and in feeling him, you felt what you cannot actually express.”

This is our deep dilemma and reality as finite creatures. Without taking away from this, Paul says that God, this unknown God, the God who created everything is the one who has drawn close to us in a man.

Paul is doing several amazing things at once, they might have been expecting that his message of Christ’s resurrection was just another in a series of gods, like Athena, like Mars, like Jupiter, like Zeus.

But Paul says, it’s the One God, the God hinted at by your most mystical poets, the, one whose offspring all humans are, the God within whom we have our being, the true God, this God can’t be imaged in a temple by an idol in a temple, only by a Man, by a man who has been raised from the dead and who, in that raising speaks to how the one true God wants to put the world to rights.

Given this, we are all called to change our minds. What does that mean? It means we acknowledge that the path of our “groping,” our searching, to acknowledge has sometimes been honest and sometimes it has been self-serving.

To “change our minds, to repent is to recognize that when we lie on our bed at night or sit quietly in a chair or work in our gardens that we are held in awesome mystery, that every single human being is held in this mystery whether they acknowledge it or not, even partially.

And then, the most important “change of mind/repentance” of all: it’s about recognizing that in the Risen Christ we are called to offer the love to others that God offered to us in Him: the gentleness and respect that the Spirit of Christ helps us to foster and grow into, the beauty of heaven and earth overlapping in our humble help, our kind words and our prayers for each other.

To change our minds is to acknowledge and embrace that “in Him we live and move and have our being” not as a sheer fact, but as a vocation!

It is to welcome the cross-stitching power of the Holy Spirit’s presence in our daily lives. In Christ, our vocation is to be the image of God in the temple, the temple of all creation, humans, threading our lives together with God’s loving justice, every day being God’s appointed Day when righteousness becomes reality through our prayers and lives, through our love of God and our neighbours.