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### On Mars Hill

One of my students, a Capuchin novice, drew my attention to an article by the Archbishop of Denver, who is also a Capuchin, Charles J. Chaput. The article is “St. Paul in the Public Square” in the latest edition of *First Things*. In the article Fr. Chaput pitches against private religion, and bids Catholics to come out and make their voices heard – in other words, to be like St. Paul, and not be afraid of the public square.

In his article on Paul, Fr. Chaput is reminding Catholics that Paul was first and foremost an evangelist of the Great Commission, which is Christ’s command that if we are his followers, then we are discipling others (Mt.28:16-18). This cannot be a private activity, it must be a public activity. It is in this same spirit of getting out into the public square that at the behest of Bishop David Walker the Broken Bay Institute, in collaboration with other academics at other Institutes, is setting up the National E-conference on St. Paul in June, which will network participants around the whole continent of Australia – and further afield. The conference offers a concrete opportunity for others of us to propagate it, and get people along to the cyber public square.

What I have to say bounces off a couple of other points made by Fr. Chaput. Firstly, his article informs us that the word *truth* occurs about fifty times in Paul’s letters. This is a significant quantity. But it is more significant, as Fr. Chaput points out, that theologically, love in Paul is tied to truth: “Love does not rejoice in wrong, but rejoices with the truth.” (1 Cor. 13:6). Now we could misunderstand this easily. The love Paul is referring to is not an *attitude*. We could easily be led to believe that the love Paul speaks of, which is not an attitude that rejoices in wrong, means that an attitude that rejoices in what is *right* (morally speaking) is upholding *truth*. When people misunderstand Paul in this way it leads to moral policing and sanctimonious attitudes which are contrary to Christ’s teaching. I mention this because I see this as a misunderstanding that is operating within denominations today. It provides bad witness to the world and will not bring people to Christ.

Secondly, as Fr. Chaput points out, when Paul went to Athens, he headed for what was known locally as the Areopagus (Mars Hill). This was where the intellectuals gathered and talked about the meaning of life, the universe and everything. This is the public square. Paul addresses the Epicureans and Stoics, the intellectuals of the day, the ones ostensibly with the answers, with the narrative, *a history, not a myth*. It is a history of the One God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who is calling people to repent and turn to him (Act. 17:30), of a world that is to be judged (vs.31) and of Jesus, who God has sent into the world. Some of what Paul says is in line with what the Athenians already think - that we live and move and have our being in God; but other parts of what Paul said the Athenians found unbelievable – that God raised Jesus from the dead so as to reveal his true identity to us.

If Paul refers to truth 50 or so times in his letters, it has to do with *Jesus*, not sanctimonious moral attitudinising, and as Paul says, but “we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness.” (1 Cor. 1:23). We preach it, because

“the love of Christ impels us.” (2. Cor 5: 14). Paul reiterates this point in various ways in his letters, where needs be. The other side of this, is Christ risen: “And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching [is] empty and your faith is also empty.” (1. Cor. 15: 14) “And if Christ is not risen, your faith [is] futile; you are still in your sins!” (1. Cor. 15: 17). Taken together, cross and resurrection spell *redemption*. The core of the preaching, the core of what we as Christians have to take to the public square is the message of the redemption or salvation. The redemption is not just private, something we merely “live out” (as I’ve often heard it said), but it is something Christians are compelled to take to the public square. This is the mission.

One of the points Catholic leaders have been making for quite a while now is that we need to translate truth into modern idiom. Just like Paul did on Mars Hill. He spotted an altar with an inscription “To an Unknown God” and used that as his pretext for preaching redemption through Christ (Acts. 17:23).

This is more easily said than done. I would like to give an example. At the heart of the *truth* that Paul preached is that idea, which is theological, of “substitutionary atonement”. This is the “mystery” of the redemption. In Paul’s words, “Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” on the cross (Gal. 3:13f.). “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Cor. 5:21). “Jesus Christ, our Lord...was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.” (Rom. 4:25). This is just a quick sample from three major letters, but this message is the meaning of “redemption” which is the core of what Paul has to say about Christ. It is the essence of the Great Commission.

How do we translate this into modern idiom, the idea that a man who was God died for our sins? Unless you are predisposed to do so, it is hard to understand. This is what Paul found on Mars Hill. Most people found his good news laughable, but a few didn’t. First then, let us remember that the church is made up of those few. Second, like Paul, we go public anyway. Third, and most importantly, with regard to saying what Paul said, but in our idiom, the redemption taught neatly out of context as a ‘truth’ will avail little. As Paul did, we have to set the scene, we have to place it *within a narrative*. And that narrative will be the biblical narrative, which is about *the meaning of history*. The fact is that the truth of redemption *only* makes sense in narrative terms and historically speaking. Redemption in the abstract, conceptually speaking, makes no sense at all in our idiom. What we can do then, is like Paul, to get hold of the sense of history that we need – which the Bible gives an account of – which tells of God working in the world, in partnership with people, and doing something for them, and doing something for others through them. Our story is about the meaning of history; this is what we have to put before people. This is what Paul tried to communicate on Mars Hill. He didn’t get much leverage, but at Thessalonica it was different, there, Acts says, “they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.” (17:11). What they are checking out in their Bibles is the meaning of history, is that what the Bible says? Is it *true*? We can do this in our modern idiom more easily than Paul could because people today have a sense of history which they didn’t have on Mars Hill, where time was thought either to be endless or cyclical or both – but not historical. Today, when we all already think time is historical, it should be easier to raise the pitch of conversation in the public square about the meaning of history – and that is where we make redemption central to the story. Of course we have to do a bit of study and learn how to do this before we hit the streets; but that is our responsibility.

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