

Knox Uniting Church Cluster

Sunday May 10th 2026 – (Year A. Easter 6)

Sermon (reflection) by Russell Croxford at Rowville Uniting Church

Bible passages: Acts 17:22-31; 1 Peter 3:13-17; John 14:15-17 (NRSVUE)

“Closer than you think”

PREAMBLE (early introduction to theme)

Today’s title is ‘Closer than you think’. God is closer than we think. Sometimes we may feel he is very distant, uncaring or inaccessible, but it’s in those very times that God is much closer than we realise. In fact, he remains in you and part of you always. As Paul said in today’s reading, “in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). God promises to never leave us alone. His spirit remains in us as his living presence, as Jesus promised his disciples in John 14:15. When we go through tough times he is more present than ever. When being a Christian is hard going in this world and we experience any kind of hardship or suffering because of our faith, we are blessed by the deep abiding presence of God. (1 Peter 3:13-14)

MESSAGE

As a young person, growing up in the Churches of Christ, it was common for the preacher to give an ‘altar call’, inviting people to come forward to commit their lives to Christ, with the idea that baptism would soon follow. I was eleven years old when I responded to such an altar call. It was a very clear and certain decision on my part, and I became fully committed to serving God and his church, from a very young age.

The big problem was that *outside* the church environment, I told no-one about my faith. I doubt anyone at school knew I was a Christian. I think it was because I was afraid I would be picked on – and no-one likes to be bullied. So I kept quiet.

I did become braver about my faith over the years. In senior high school I joined a Christian Group at school. At university I let it be known, here and there, I was a Christian. When I became a teacher, I helped set up a lunchtime Christian drop in at the public school where I worked. But all that time I still carried a fear of ridicule because of my faith. Nothing bad ever happened, but still I worried. When I compare myself to the way many Jews, for example, are being horribly tormented because of their faith, as we’ve heard in the current Royal Commission, I had it easy! (Noting that Muslims and others are often similarly tormented. Both antisemitism and Islamophobia are horrible)

For me it was not so much the suffering for my faith, but the *fear* of suffering.

In our reading today from 1 Peter, we are told that we are likely to suffer because of our faith. In fact, it suggests that we are indeed *blessed* if we suffer, which is a bit hard to believe sometimes. But the main point Peter makes, is not to *fear* in our suffering, saying, “Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord” (v14-15). This is similar to Jesus’ words in last week’s gospel reading: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me”. (John 14:1).

How do we do that? One big step towards *not* fearing is to believe in the promise of God’s presence in our lives in all situations. He is always closer than you think.

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus is aware the disciples will go out into the world and experience suffering and will inevitably be afraid. Thus, he assures them that the Holy Spirit will be with them forever (v16). He will abide with them and be in them (v17).

Through the Spirit, Christ will remain ever-present, constantly encouraging and guiding them. God is thus always near – always closer than they think.

There is a theological word that describes this. *Immanence*. It means God is fully present, always, within all creation, and within all people. (It complements the other nature of God as *transcendent*, meaning he is, at the same time outside and beyond creation). God wanted to demonstrate his immanence by becoming human in Jesus, for which there is another word called *Immanuel*, (often used at Christmas) meaning, *God with us*.

The way I see it is that God, through Christ, is in *all* his creation – in every life, every movement, every breath, every colour, every texture, every action of love, every joy and every feeling. So close that we can reach out and touch Him.

This is the main point the Apostle Paul was making in our reading today from Acts.

In this story Paul has arrived in Athens. The Athenians were generally a highly educated people who loved exploring philosophy, new ideas and concepts. They would often stand around in the marketplace (known as the Agora) debating and discussing anything intellectual. Socrates and Plato were themselves Athenians who engaged in this practice in that city, a few hundred years before Paul arrived on the scene.

We are told that Paul began preaching to these Athenians and ended up being taken to a special place in the city called the Areopagus, to share his new thoughts. This place, sometimes called ‘Mars Hill’, was a prominent, rocky outcrop, not far from the Acropolis and the Agora, set aside for such idea-sharing and debating. This was a place where the philosophers, lawyers, teachers and members of the aristocracy often gathered.

[show pictures of Areopagus today, and image of Paul preaching in the Areopagus]



Paul’s main point was to help these Athenians – who were very religious worshippers of many gods, discover the *real* God – not just *who* God was, but his *living presence* in the world and how close he was to all of the Athenians. Paul tells them how he saw an altar with the inscription, “To an unknown god” [see picture], pointing out that this unknown god can be known to them. This ‘unknown god’ is the God they are seeking, according to Paul, and is a God who is “not far from each one of us” (v 27). This is a God who is *closer than you think*.

Paul was talking about *immanence*, as I mentioned before, where God not only created all things but is *in* all things and *in* all people, including the Athenians themselves. (v24-25). He then makes that familiar statement, “For in him we live and move and have our being” (v28), which is actually a quote from a Greek poet, making it a very clever way for Paul to get their attention!

Those words, 'in him we live, move and have our being' beautifully capture that sense of intimate connectedness between human and divine, showing how God is always fully present in all of our humanness.

One commentator on this passage (Philip Ruge-Jones, Working Preacher) makes this point: "The only time we have had an experience of living, moving, and having our being within another is when we inhabit our mother's womb. And this image leads to a declaration that humans like both Paul and the Athenians are like offspring of the one in whom they had been carried".

That's a really lovely and very appropriate thought for today, being Mother's Day! From a human perspective, the only time we are that intimately connected, physiologically, with another, is when we are in our mother's womb. It's a lovely illustration of how we, spiritually live, move and have our being in God as our creator. We are 'in his womb'.

Paul encourages the Athenians to discover this presence for themselves. The Psalmists (on many occasions) would call this 'finding their place of *refuge* or *shelter*', in which they find safety, peace, comfort and freedom from fear. It's a place we all need to find.

But at the same time as being in the place of refuge we need to be interacting with the world around us, with all of its nasty problems.

Paul's very presence in the foreign city of Athens was his interaction with the wider world and all its strange beliefs. He didn't stay couped up in the synagogue. His heart's desire was to help Gentiles experience this amazing presence of God. How do we make God's presence known to others? We may experience his presence within the walls of the church, but how do share that 'out there'? When people say, "God doesn't exist" or "God is distant", how do we help them to know that he is *up close and personal*?

One clear thing Paul did was to mix among them, to connect with the things that mattered to them (even if he didn't agree personally). And, above all, he learned their ways and he did his best to speak their language. Do we do that? Is the church really speaking a language that our local community can relate to? There's a big challenge in that for us!

Paul was able to challenge the Athenians about their beliefs, but only after working very hard to connect with them first, helping them to realise that they, like all humans are in search of the unknown God, whether they had realised it or not. But even when he did challenge them, he did it with respect of their culture and their ways. Peter picks this up in our other reading when he says, "Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you yet *do it with gentleness and respect*" (italics mine) (v15-16).

So, Paul did not stay in the safety of his 'Christian huddle'. He stepped out and interacted. Going back to that idea of God as our refuge and shelter, does that mean we need to step out of our 'refuge' to interact with the world? No! In fact, we *take that refuge with us!*

This is what Brother Lawrence called 'Practicing the Presence of God' as he wrote in 1691. One of his often-quoted lines is this: "The most holy and important practice in the spiritual life is the presence of God - that is, every moment to take great pleasure that God is with you". At church, at home, walking the dog, driving the car, making dinner – every moment!

Going back to the time I was growing up as a young Christian, afraid of facing the big, bad world, I think what I needed most back then was to 'practice the presence of God'. That's what I would say to my younger self. I'm getting better at it, gradually, but it's a lifelong practice and I still need to do it a lot more. Every day I need the reminder – we *all* need the reminder – that God is much closer than we think.