



St. Paul Preaching to the Athenians on the Areopagus

A GIFT FROM THE LITURGICAL INSTITUTE FOR ALUMNUS BISHOP JAMES S. WALL, BISHOP OF GALLUP
PAINTED BY LEONARD PORTER IN THE YEAR OF SAINT PAUL 2009; OIL ON LINEN, 12 X 19 INCHES

FROM THE ARTIST:

The Liturgical Institute in Mundelein, Illinois, commissioned Leonard Porter Studio to create a painting of "Paul Preaching to the Athenians" to be given as a gift to the Institute's first alumnus to be ordained as a bishop, the Most Reverend James Wall. The commission wanted to celebrate a man energized with an evangelical spirit whose mission is to persuade a thoughtful audience who yearn for spiritual meaning in their lives.

Acts 17:16-34 recounts Paul's experience in Athens. Paul is amazed to find the Athenians worshiping religiously in shrines temples and at altars. He particularly notices the altar to the unknown god and engaging the philosophers, particularly Stoics and Epicureans, he declares that Christ is the god they are groping for in the dark. Paul draws parallels between Christian and Greek thought and offers Christianity as the fulfillment of their philosophical quest. Paul is able to convert Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris and unnumbered others.

The painting depicts Paul preaching on the Areopagus, the small hill that stands above the Agora and below the Acropolis. On the lower level, the Agora is a world of profane commercialism and idolatry, while the Acropolis represents the heights of spiritual ascension with its temples of wisdom. The Areopagus was the site of a court and therefore a place for arguments and persuasion and it is here that Paul chooses to engage the Athenian philosophers and those gathered to hear him. He calls on them to forsake the worldly lower ground and follow a higher path. With his hands he points both up and down. A statue of Ares atop a Doric Column is seen on the right. As in Raphael's version of the same scene, he turns his back to Paul. The sword of Paul's eventual martyrdom is in his hand.

Paul seeks to enlighten them and light is a principle metaphor in the painting. As God's word is revealed by Paul, clouds in the sky break and allow sunlight to show through. Light illuminates the Acropolis while the Agora is obscured by shade. Likewise in the foreground only Paul, Dionysius and Damaris are lit. A beam of light comes very close to the seated figure in the lower right corner with reflected light bounces on him. Beside him the water of salvation flows from the mouth of the fountain just as it flows from Paul's speech. A cup of acceptance is placed just before him. He has but to pick it up and

drink. The reflections in the pool of water allude to reflection and thought. Behind him a crowd listens. Among them are a young family and an elegant lady wearing a wide brimmed hat, a common accessory in sunny Greece, but in this case it shields her from the word of God.

The group of philosophers display various reactions to Paul's speech. One (modeled on Zeno of Citium, 334 - 262 BCE) carries a cane and appears to be blind, while another (Heraclitus of Ephesus, c. 535-c. 475 BCE) engages Paul directly. Behind him yet another (Epicurus, 341-270 BCE) looks downward in the opposite direction. The are all in shadow. From a Christian point of view, stoicism is understood to have uncovered some of the nature of the universe. The concept of a flame-like logos (a design or consciousness) that underpins all creation is clearly monotheistic. But this revelation was only partial and until they were exposed to Christ, they could only achieve limited participation. The small flame lighting up the dark column on the left alludes to this. The column is taken from the porch of the Pantheon in Rome. The play of light and shadow on its double scotia base has been interpreted by others to convey similar Christian themes. The power of this lamplight is dwarfed by the beam of sunlight offered by Paul.

This beam of light strikes Dionysius and the woman Damaris as they are converted. Damaris purposely removes her own wide brimmed hat to accept the light. Close inspection shows that this green wide brimmed hat is in fact a bishop's hat. And it falls at the feet of Dionysius. He is called to become a bishop, the first bishop of Athens. This seems appropriate because the painting is a gift for a man also called to be a bishop. Dionysius' foot also stands upon a rock covered with mysterious runes, which are in fact symbols taken from the Liturgical Institute's heraldic crest, celebrating Bishop Wall's experience at Mundelein. For those unaware of this allusion the strange symbols may appear to demonstrate the Greek philosophers' inability to decipher the truth of the universe. They point toward them as they question Paul.

WINNER OF THE 2006 ARTHUR ROSS AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE IN THE CLASSICAL TRADITION, LEONARD PORTER LIVES AND PAINTS IN NEW YORK CITY.