

*NOTE: This sermon used a PowerPoint centering on two paintings by Raphael. Good high quality images of these paintings can be found at*

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/03/Escola\\_de\\_atenas\\_-\\_vaticano.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/03/Escola_de_atenas_-_vaticano.jpg)

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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disputation\\_of\\_the\\_Holy\\_Sacrament\\_-\\_/media/File:Disputa\\_del\\_Sacramento\\_\(Rafael\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disputation_of_the_Holy_Sacrament_-_/media/File:Disputa_del_Sacramento_(Rafael).jpg)

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About eighteen-hundred years ago, the important North African Christian theologian, Tertullian, asked what has become a famous question: "What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?" Or in its fuller form: "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church?"<sup>1</sup>

Tertullian is using Athens, the seat of classical Greek philosophy and learning to represent secular human knowledge and reason. And he is using Jerusalem, the place of Jesus' death and resurrection, to represent religious faith and belief.

And Tertullian's basic argument is, 'If you have faith, you don't really need to worry about human reason. In fact, human philosophy and thought, human knowledge can trip you up and mess up your religious faith.'

And Tertullian's view was very influential in the early church. To be fair, there were other voices that tried to blend the best of secular knowledge and classical Greek learning with Christianity. The philosophy of Plato was very important in the Gospel of John, the Epistle to the Hebrews, and the work of the great St. Augustine. And the philosophy of Aristotle was very important to the Roman-Christian philosopher Boethius, and later to the great St. Thomas Aquinas.

Nevertheless, Tertullian's assertion was influential and powerful for centuries: that Athens really has nothing to say to Jerusalem, that the Academy has nothing to say to the Church, that mere human knowledge cannot inform religious faith.

Even today we have some Christians who reject "Athens". They reject modern science and any form of human knowledge. They worry that if they send their children to secular schools or universities that their children will be tainted or messed up. They would rather live purely in a world of faith.

On the other hand, today in our world, there are many people that would turn Tertullian's question on its head. They would say that Jerusalem has nothing to say to Athens.

Human knowledge reigns supreme, they would say. Religious faith is useless. It's a tired old superstition that belongs to a bygone era, not the modern world. We have seen in our own time the resurgence of the New Atheism. We have also seen the rise of Scientism, the view that human science can provide all the answers to all of life's questions.

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<sup>1</sup> Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum*, 7

Now to be fair, I am trained in both the natural sciences and in religion. I have a Bachelor's degree in Chemistry with a Biology minor, as well as a Master's of Divinity.

Plus, I am an Episcopalian. We are a tradition that values both faith and reason. We are a tradition that says, "Not either/or, but both/and."

So it should come as no surprise that I would reject any assertion that Athens has nothing to do with Jerusalem, or that Jerusalem has nothing to do with Athens. Both human knowledge and religious faith are gifts from God, and we should embrace both.

But how do we do that? For modern Christians, what is the relationship between reason and faith? To deal that issue, I want to look for a few moments at a work of art. This work of art was created at a time when the pendulum was not on Tertullian's extreme 2<sup>nd</sup> century position when the answer was "Religion only, or faith only." Nor had the pendulum swung to our modern 21<sup>st</sup> century extreme of saying, "Knowledge only, or science only."

Rather, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the pendulum was actively in motion between these two positions. There was a hunger to reclaim lost human knowledge and thought that had been largely forgotten during the middle ages. And there was a desire to integrate this thought with a vibrant sense of faith.

In the early 1500's, the great Michelangelo was hard at work on one of his masterpieces, the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. But while Michelangelo was up on the scaffolding in that Vatican chapel doing his painting, there was another great artist working nearby. Really, just down the hall and around the corner from the Sistine Chapel.

The young artist Raphael had been commissioned to create frescos in 4 rooms. One of these rooms was the Pope's library. And in that room Raphael painted his greatest work.

It is titled *The School of Athens*. It is a masterpiece of Renaissance painting. It is a masterpiece of Renaissance thought.

The title, *The School of Athens*, was added later. That title is probably a misnomer and does not reflect Raphael's central vision. The better title probably comes from the Latin inscription above the painting: *Causarum Cognitio* (Seek knowledge of causes).

The inscription is an invitation to tap into the best of human knowledge, to converse in this library setting with some of humanity's greatest thinkers.

This was a powerful renaissance idea. As classical wisdom was being rediscovered, the message of this painting is that the great ideas of humanity have much to offer. What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? A whole lot, Raphael is saying. In the Christian faith, these ancient thinkers have much to offer.

The painting centers on the two greatest ancient philosophers, Plato and his student Aristotle. They are smack dab in the middle, they are at the focal point of the painting. And Raphael brilliantly portrays their varying ideas of the world through their posture.

Plato is pointing heavenward. If you've studied Plato's thought, you know that his focus is the world of the ideal, the greater reality that stands behind the reality that we perceive with our senses.

Aristotle, on the other hand, is gesturing to this world. His thought centers on analyzing the material world around us, this present reality, rather than speculating on what might lie behind it.

As one historian says,

"Plato became the godfather of the religious, artistic, intuitive, and mystical side of the Western personality. But he also turns out to have put his finger on the truth of modern quantum physics...

"Aristotle in turn, became spokesman for the West's utilitarian scientific side... This makes Aristotle the progenitor not only of sending rockets to the moon but of democratic individualism and free markets."<sup>2</sup>

His thesis is that we need both Plato and Aristotle in our world. They are our intellectual "yin and yang."<sup>3</sup>

And that is what Raphael is trying to portray. Plato and Aristotle together are walking toward the viewer, moving the discussion forward together.

Alongside them are many other thinkers, usually associated with their particular schools of thought. For example, on Plato's side is the mathematician Pythagoras who looked for beautiful theoretical ratios and symbolic relationships between numbers. On Aristotle's side is the mathematician Euclid, down on the ground, actually measuring things in the real world.

And there are many others, both scholars from the Greek world, as well as others, including a Muslim and a female philosopher.

And the thinkers represent not only on philosophy and mathematics, but astronomy, geography, science and music. Raphael even includes classic rock, since he painted the album cover for one of the greatest albums of the early 1990's.

Plus, Raphael uses faces of his own 16<sup>th</sup> century contemporaries, his peers, and even himself as models for the great thinkers of the past. Raphael ties his own world to the world of antiquity. Raphael brings together the very best of both his present and his past.

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<sup>2</sup> Arthur Herman, *The Cave and the Light: Plato vs. Aristotle and the Struggle for the Soul of Western Civilization*, p. 565f

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, p. 570

'Okay,' you might say. 'Fr. Jim, that's a fascinating look at a famous painting and a glimpse into the history of Western culture. But what does that possibly have to do with All Saints Day?'

I would start with a line from our Epistle lesson. In Ephesians the writer says, "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him."<sup>4</sup>

A spirit of wisdom and revelation. Wisdom is important. Human knowledge is a gift from God. The ability to think and to discover is of inestimable value. Raphael's painting is a grand celebration of human wisdom.

But, Ephesians asks God for both wisdom and revelation. Revelation is God revealing himself, revealing who he is. Scripture is the record of God revealing himself to his people. And as Christians we see the fullest revelation of who God is in the person of Jesus Christ.

What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? Both are important. Both are gifts from God. Wisdom and revelation. Knowledge and faith.

It has been observed that Raphael is placing great thinkers in a space that is reminiscent of a Christian cathedral. Most cathedrals were cruciform, cross shaped. There was a long middle aisle. But there were also the transepts, the two wings that formed the arms of the cross. The figures in this painting seem to be walking through such a building.

Also, there is a series of 3 arches that Aristotle and Plato have walked through. There is important symbolism here. The exercise of human knowledge happens in the context of 3 overarching structures.

It has been thought that the 3 arches symbolizes the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Human thought and discovery happens under the umbrella of God's overarching presence.

Now, you may be thinking I'm stretching things here. But there's one other hugely important thing in this room. As you look at the painting, Plato and Aristotle seem to be walking toward you, walking toward the observer. That means that they are moving in a certain direction, the direction of the opposite wall of the room.

It's a very clear message. Human knowledge and thought is not an end in itself. Instead it is on the move towards something else.

And if you are standing in the room, looking at *The School of Athens*, and then turn around, this is what you'd see.

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<sup>4</sup> Eph 1:17

This is Raphael's painting, *Disputa*. Again, the title is a perhaps a misnomer. Raphael's words over the painting are *Divinar rer notitia* (knowledge of divine things). Remember, the first painting has the inscription "Seek knowledge of causes." But along with seeking human knowledge, Raphael adds this other painting, "Knowledge of divine things." And knowledge of divine things only comes through God revealing them to his people.

Thus we have the presence of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We also have the great saints of scripture: Moses, David, Peter, Paul, John the Baptist, and Mary among others. We also have the portrayal of the 4 Gospels, each of these books containing the title and first words of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And it's no accident that the Holy Spirit is in the midst of these Gospels. As our catechism says these books were written "under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit... God inspired their human authors" and "God still speaks to us" through scripture.<sup>5</sup>

And below the church triumphant, the Saints in heaven, is the church militant, the saints on earth.

This second group is gathered around the altar. And on that altar, halfway between the saints in heaven and the saints on earth is the sacrament, the Eucharist. One day we will gather with the saints in heaven around Jesus' throne. But for now, the closest we come to heaven is gathering with God's people around his table.

Raphael's message is clear. Human knowledge is a wonderful thing. It is to be celebrated and embraced. And yet, it is not an end in itself. It moves us toward another reality, a deeper reality, a heavenly reality.

"Seek knowledge of causes." But also embrace, "Knowledge of divine things." Both are vitally important to living as God's people in this world.

As Ephesians says, "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> BCP p 853

<sup>6</sup> Eph 1:17-18