

Easter 7: ‘You’re kidding! A Mission Statement in John’s Gospel?’ by Mark Pilgrim

Let’s start with a bit of fun.

I’m going to give you a mission statement from a high profile, global company related to the internet and you see if you can guess which of these four companies – Amazon, Apple, Facebook and Google, each belongs to:

‘to organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful’ Google

‘to bring the best personal computing experience to students, educators, creative professionals and consumers around the world through its innovative hardware, software and Internet offerings’ Apple

‘to be earth’s most customer centric company; to build a place where people can come to find and discover anything they might want to buy online’ Amazon

and

‘to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected’ Facebook

OK – now how many people heard a mission statement, expressed twice no less, in today’s Gospel? ‘Mission statements in St John’s Gospel – are you kidding?’

What, though, is the phrase set out in John 17, ‘may the disciples be so one with God and one with each other ‘that the world may believe that you have sent me’, if not a mission statement?

What are we gathering in this church for now? If it’s not, in some sense, ‘that the world might believe that God has sent Jesus’, we should probably think of finishing now and going home! What have Christians down the centuries gathered together and worked for? Surely it’s to witness to the world that God sent and is present in Christ.

What did the first disciples risk life and limb for as they fanned out from Jerusalem and travelled across Asia Minor? It was to implement the Christian mission statement: We are doing this ‘that the world may believe that God sent Jesus.’

How far does the message that God sent Jesus into the world need to be taken? Answer: to the ends of the earth.

Until the message is taken and spread across the world, all Christian mission and all church activity should be devoted to that end. Fortunately, though, our mission statement isn’t just wrapped up in the poetic language of John’s Gospel.

I suggest that, alongside the academic textbook that is John’s Gospel, Luke’s Acts of the Apostles helps as a manual or practical guide to our overall Christian mission statement. The Acts of the Apostles gives us teaching, case studies and guidelines on how to share the message ‘God sent Jesus’ with the world.

Let’s recall the two incidents in this morning’s passage from Acts. First Paul and Silas come across a slave girl exploited by her owners for her power of divination. Jesus’ disciples free her from this exploitation. Her owners are so mad at Paul and Silas that the disciples end up in prison. There they meet the second person in the passage to be set free for a new life. The person they set free is the prison jailer. This liberation is stupendously ironic. Instead of the jailer setting Paul and Silas free, the activity of God sets the disciples free to wait around in jail for the jailer to come. Staying in prison, Paul and Silas save the jailer’s

life twice over. Physically they prevent his suicide and, spiritually, they lead him and his household to belief in Christ.

There is one neat lesson we can learn from these two incidents. And I suggest it is this: **Jesus' disciples can liberate with the love of Christ those locked into godless systems.**

The slave girl is locked into a godless system of divination and exploitation: it is human abuse, with no acknowledgment of the girl being made in the image and likeness of God. And the jailer is locked into slavish loyalty to Rome, with no space being given for the one true God of Jewish and Christian tradition.

The interesting thing is that these two incidents can be seen as case studies from Christianity's first days of people locked into godless systems which have their equivalents in our own day.

The news over the last two weeks, for instance, has been full of graphic reminders of the exploitation of vulnerable people in Bangladesh. Here, as we know only too well, clothing manufacturers, enslaved to the god of quick profit, have created factories in totally unsuitable buildings, resulting now in huge and tragic loss of life. The salutary question for us to ask of ourselves is 'To what extent do our purchasing choices encourage or discourage this exploitation?' Might Christians combatting injustice and economic exploitation, after the example of Jesus in the Gospels, be a more effective way of showing the world that God has come in Christ than vicars and curates preaching 100 sermons?

As for the example of the jailer and people like him being unthinkingly and slavishly loyal to a godless system – how about a contemporary example being Richard Dawkins and the New Atheists being enslaved to the system of thought known as Scientific Materialism. Scientific Materialism, like the Roman state, invites its adherents to reject all belief in the Creator God of Judaism and Christianity. Scientific Materialism, in our own day, offers a godless view of the world which a number of our contemporaries have themselves come to believe in. But I say 'they have come to believe in this 'beliefless' view of the world' deliberately: because Scientific Materialism can easily be shown to be a system of thought built upon assumptions about science and facts which are themselves simply beliefs, open to question and severe doubt. For material to liberate people you might know from the godless creed of Scientific Materialism, pick up a piece of paper from the back of church entitled BBC News 'Ghosts in the Material World'. It's the script from last Sunday's A Point of View programme by John Gray. In it he suggests, for instance, 'it's the dogma of materialism that should be exorcised from our mind' and 'the prevailing creed of scientific materialism is actually a contradiction, for science isn't a fixed view of things, still less a dogmatic faith.'

If the debate between science and faith interests you, I thoroughly recommend this essay by John Gray to you.

So, there we have it. The chief object of our gathering together for worship as Christians is expressed in John 17verses 21 and 23. 'May disciples be one with God and with each other 'that the world may know that God sent Jesus.' And in those last nine words can be found the mission statement for the whole of Christianity: 'that the world may know that God sent Jesus.'

As we implement and deliver the mission, in collaboration with God's Holy Spirit, Luke's Acts of the Apostles provides case-studies and examples of how we, as Christians, implement our mission statement to share with the world that God sent Jesus. Today we are given two to study. Both, in their own way, offer teaching on this and, specifically, how to liberate with the love of Christ those in our world locked into godless systems.

May we do all we can to follow these examples, liberating both ourselves and others from godless systems as part of our contribution to the overall Christian mission of witnessing that 'God sent Jesus' to the ends of the earth. Amen.