

Isaiah 61

I wonder if you have ever read a company's mission statement and thought 'who ever created that'? They often use clever and imaginative words to create a powerful image of themselves and yet sometimes the reality may not quite live up to their words. Here's an example of one very famous company's mission statement, 'To refresh the world in body, mind and spirit, to inspire moments of optimism and happiness, to create value and make a difference'. Does drinking a can of this particular fizzy drink really do that? I mean I like a glass of the diet version, especially if it's lovely and cold straight from the fridge, but am I refreshed in body, mind and spirit because of drinking it, does it give me moments of optimism and create value in my life? I think I'd have to question that, but that is the mission statement for one particular soft drinks company.

Today we have two bible passages that speak about people's mission statements in a way.

John the Baptist is a man on a mission – he has just one job to do, but it is an important job and he does it with a great amount of energy. It was a job that had been prophesied about many years before in Isaiah. John the Baptist's one job was to announce the coming of the Saviour and I think we would have to say that he fulfils his mission statement pretty well.

The angel who had announced John's birth to Zechariah had made it clear this child was to be set apart for God's service, and John remained faithful to this calling.

John, we know is a fairly distinctive person, he has an odd style in clothing and an even odder diet and he has been baptising people with water and telling them to turn from their ways, and having been questioned by the Pharisees about who he is, he tells them that he is not the Christ, nor Elijah but that he is part of the fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah saying 'I am the voice of the one calling in the desert, make straight the way for the Lord'.

Well, our other bible passage is also a prophetic vision. In Isaiah 61 we hear the well-known words that speak about a coming Messiah, one who has been anointed by the Holy Spirit so that He is blessed and empowered. Messiah, means anointed one. In the Old Testament, people who were anointed such as Kings and Leaders were anointed with oil as an outward sign of an inward working of the Holy Spirit.

In the new covenant, all Christians are anointed as we are filled and blessed with the Holy Spirit.

The passage is also familiar to us because it has come to be known as Jesus' manifesto or mission statement, as Luke tells us in his gospel that Jesus stood up in the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth and read this passage from the scriptures and then said 'today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. In effect, I am the one this prophecy is referring to.

This passage is really Jesus' keynote address,

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me,

To preach good news to the poor

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind
To release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

The year of the Lord's favour is a reference to the Jubilee law set in the OT laws in Leviticus.

It basically stated that every 50 years, on the 50th year, all debts are cancelled, slaves and prisoners are freed and the mercies of God will be great, a year of great blessings. The Jubilee message encompasses spiritual restoration, moral transformation, rescue for demonic oppression and release from illness. This is a powerful mission statement.

Jesus is saying that, what until now had been promised, hoped for, long awaited since the time of Isaiah, has become a reality in His presence.

Whilst this mission statement is about going out and telling others, I wonder how many of us listening this morning need to hear these words being said over our own lives?

We are coming towards the end of a year that has been incredibly hard for everyone. We are tired, some of us may be feeling very lonely and isolated, we are mourning the loss of loved ones, we have been separated from friends and family for far too long, we are worried about our jobs or our health and Jesus says to us:

If you are feeling poor spiritually, mentally, physically, I have good news to give you

If you are feeling imprisoned by your own four walls, by fear of leaving your house – I offer you a different kind of freedom.

If you are oppressed by worry and anxiety – I offer release from that.

Jesus longs to speak words of hope and good news into our lives – He came in order to bring forgiveness for our sins to release us from our internal prisons and to reconcile us to God.

Jesus was sent to bring recovery of sight to the blind. This as we know was literal and metaphoric. He not only physically restored sight to the blind but he opens the eyes of all who trust in Him to the revelation and salvation of God's grace.

Maybe there are some of us who used to have great vision but now have to wear glasses or contact lenses. The font size on my sermon notes these days is much bigger than it used to be because I don't want to wear glasses when I speak to you, they feel like a barrier, but my eyesight is getting worse. I wonder how many of us, if we are honest, feel sometimes as though we need glasses in order to have a better vision of Jesus because the darkness in our lives has blocked out the light for us to see Him properly. I think, after this year, there may be many people struggling with this dilemma. The pandemic has plunged the world into darkness it feels.

Jesus longs to bring restoration to our bodies, minds and souls. If we let Him, Jesus will restore us so that we might see Him clearly again. He is the 'light that shines in the darkness but the darkness has not understood it'.

John the Baptist knew about that light, his job, his mission statement if you like, was to prepare people to receive the light. He himself was not the light, he came only as a witness to the light.

We like John the Baptist, are not the source of God's light, we merely reflect that light. John knew Jesus, his whole life was to watch and wait for the coming Messiah and prepare people to receive him. John shared his faith in Jesus by telling others about him, 'soon someone will come who will baptise with the Holy Spirit and provide true forgiveness of sins'. John served Jesus in his ministry to others.

John's mission is like our own mission statement that we have taken for our church, to know Jesus, to share our faith and to lovingly serve others.

We need to live distinctively as John did – maybe without the strange clothing and diet of locusts but in such a way that we too reflect the light of Jesus.

Yesterday the team from LoveFetcham were outside Sainsbury's giving away free chocolate. So many people thought they had to give us money for it. Whilst they loved the idea of something for free, they didn't always understand why. We went round the shops saying hello to all the shopkeepers and the people in the barbers. We told them we just wanted to bless the community and spread some joy. The smiles on people's faces showed us how much they appreciated the gesture. Yesterday we were distinctly different – who offers something for free?

One commentator said 'The Church's most important moral contribution to the society around it is not a distinctive and countercultural moral argument, but a distinctive and countercultural way of life that witnesses to the new possibilities opened up by following Jesus Christ'.

The most credible form of witness and the most effective thing the Church can do for the world is the actual creation of a living, breathing, visible community of faith that is present in its community, and engaged with others and meeting their needs. This has been confirmed by the Church of England's recent GRACE report that has researched the link between churches that are flourishing in numbers and depth of discipleship because of their engagement with society and its needs.

Just like John the Baptist, you and I are to remain faithful to our calling, to our mission statement, to testify as witnesses to the light, and live lives distinctively so that by our actions, our choices and our words, we point others to Jesus, the Messiah, who offers us the best news that there is, who releases us from our sins and who brings light to our dark world.

Amen