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Johannine Understanding of Mission

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Going through the Gospel of John, one comes across different views and paradigms that capture the vision John had of the “why” of Jesus. Far from contradicting each other, these different views complement and enrich each other.

When we think of the Mission of the Church, we naturally go to the classic texts of Mathew, Mark, Luke and Paul. Generations of missionaries have been inspired by the majestic and powerful words of the Risen Lord in Mt 28:18-20, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them to observe all that I have commanded you; and behold I am with you always, till the close of the ages”, or by the parallel Macron text, “Go into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to the whole of creation”(Mk 16: 15). The Lucan paradigm for mission is “that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations”(Lk 24:47-49). And finally, countless heralds of the Gospel across the centuries have taken as their own and applied to themselves the challenging words of St.Paul, “Necessities is laid upon me. Woe to me if I don’t preach the Gospel” (1 Cor 9:16).

The Johannine understanding of the Mission of Jesus

When we come to John’s gospel we see, as, in many other instances, a different approach to mission, an approach that unites better and more intimately the mission of the Church with the mission of Jesus. In two classic texts, we have almost an identical formula: “As You have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (17:18), and “As the Father has sent me, so I send you”(20:21), thus highlighting the Johannine vision that the mission of the Church is nothing less, nothing more, nothing else than participation in and continuation of the same mission that Jesus had received from his Father when he came into the world.

Though not absent in the Synoptics, it is above all in John’s Gospel that we see how Jesus was always conscious about his being sent on a mission from and by his Father. He was *the apostolos, apostle, the Sent One*. His one desire was to fulfil that mission. His heart was always set on the accomplishment of the *workergon*- that the Father had given him, as we can see from the following texts of John, where Jesus speaks about his being sent by the Father on a mission and a work.

- 3:34 “He whom God has sent speaks the words of God”
- 4:34 “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work”
- 5:37 “You do not believe him whom he (the Father) has sent”
- 6:57 “The living Father sent me and I live because of the Father”
- 7:29 “I know him, for I come from him, and he sent me”
- 8:42 “I proceeded and came forth from God; I did not come on my own accord, but he sent me
- 10:36 “Whom the Father has consecrated and sent into the world”
- 17:4 “I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work which you gave me to do”¹

Apart from his awareness that he was sent on a mission, Jesus the Apostle of the Father constantly lives in the presence of the one who sent him and he listens continually to the Father. This listening turns out to be a contemplation, a gazing at the One who had sent him. Such living in the presence of the Father prepares him for dependent action, action that depends entirely on the one who sent him, and to do what the one who sent him to accomplish, thus an imitation of the Father in everything.²

The Mission of Jesus: Life in all its Fullness and Abundance

I think one of the clearest and best expressions in John about the mission of Jesus in Jn.10: 10, when he affirms “I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly”. As we know, life and life eternal is a central theme in John.³

It is into this world of death, a world sadly addicted to “a culture of death”⁴ that the Son of God came, that we may have life and have it in all its fullness and abundance. If an earlier elder brother Cain was an agent of death for his younger brother Abel, Jesus the new elder brother will be an agent of life, (1 Jn 3:12). Jesus the true Shepherd was killed by the false shepherds and the leaders of Israel and Rome but that death is interpreted by John as the offering of a sacrificial lamb and as the life giving self-gift of the true shepherd, for such was the mission that Jesus had received from his Father (Din 10:7-18).

Most of the discourses and controversies in John’s gospel are from the perspective of life: what is this life that Jesus came to give? What is its nature? What are the conditions in-order to share in this gift of life? What are the consequences once we live by the life that he gives? And what are the obstacles that prevent us from sharing in this life ?

In the dialogue and discussion with Nicodemus in Jn 3:1-21, we have one of the primary conditions and requirements that his life demands – our willingness and ability to be reborn once more, a birth from above and hence a new birth,⁵ under the power of the spirit and of water. The theme of water comes immediately in the next chapter, Jn 4:7-15, during the lovely encounter scene with the woman of Samaria. Here Jesus is presented as the source of life giving water, that alone can satiate and fulfil the human heart. To receive the life that Jesus came to give, is to drink, and to drink deeply and continually, from the wells of salvation that he is.

If water is an image of the gift of life that Jesus gives in the context of thirst in ch.4, the same gift of life is presented as bread in Ch 6 in the context of hunger and the manna of the desert. To receive and to live by the life of Jesus is to be nourished by the bread that he gives and the bread that he is for the life of the world. And later, in the context of death and dying, in Ch 11, Jesus affirms emphatically that he is the Resurrection and the Life, 11:25. In the controversies with the Jews in Chs 5, 8, 9, 10, 12 etc. we see how John presents the reality of Jesus in terms of life, under various images and symbols. These images and symbols will vary according to the situation and the audience, but the reality is the same - the gift of life that Jesus came to give and one the necessary condition to receive that life is faith in him.

Jesus, the Communicator of Truth and Freedom

Another Johannine vision of the mission of Jesus is that Jesus is the communicator of truth and freedom. Jesus affirms in 8:31-36, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and truth will make you free, and so, if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed”. In John’s mind, without Christ and his revelation, and without our free loving response to him in a humble surrender and faith, we remain in darkness, in error, and in illusion, caught up in our own ignorance. Because our deeds are evil, we prefer to remain in our darkness and hate the light of his revelation and to come to the true light that he is (Jn 3:19-21). The lord of this godless world, the devil, and his acolyte, sin, keep us all enchained and enslaved. From this situation of slavery and unfreedom, only the Son can make us free.

In the dramatic and magnificent trial scene during the passion, we hear Jesus telling Pilate, “for this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to bear witness to the truth; everyone who is of the truth hears my voice” (Jn 18:37). He came to reveal and manifest the truth about God and man, about life and its value, and about the things that really matter amidst the conflicting ideologies of our world. And he could do that precisely because he knew he alone was “the Way, the Truth and the Life” (Jn 14:6). Jesus was not only the Word made flesh, but also the Truth made flesh and “Freedom made Flesh”.⁶ In our world of unfreedom and slavery, he alone was really free and hence he alone could make others free.

This is how a perceptive modern author writes when he reflects on the freedom of Jesus:

It is fascinating to notice how Jesus’ sense of mission energized and imbued all his ministry. In his dealings with people, he was never fearful of anyone nor was he restrained by any taboo; he was a perfectly free person. He put his exceptional freedom completely at the service of others. He gave every person he met his undivided attention without even a trace of self-concern. The people he met experienced this encounter as amazingly wholesome and freeing. He called forth the very best in each person. In the presence of Jesus, people could fully be themselves. With Jesus there was room for everyone. He never had the slightest temptation to exploit or manipulate, let alone to write off anyone. In no way did he shy away from meeting people, yet in all his contacts he was never shallow or self-centred. Neither did he fear confrontation or conflict, nor on these occasions would he ever lose his composure or his peace of heart. There was always a genuine warm concern for the true self of the person and with a wonderful ease he related to people in sincere and heartfelt affection and love.⁷

Jesus at the Service of Human Salvation

The very name Jesus means salvation, Yahweh’s salvation. One of the classical, and perhaps the most common way of speaking about the work and mission of Jesus has been that he came for us and for our salvation, and that he is the saviour, the only saviour. The notion of salvation is expressed in Hebrew and Greek by a whole collection of root-words which are all related to the same fundamental experience: to be saved is to be taken out of a dangerous situation in which one finds oneself. And according to the nature of the dangerous situation, salvation and the act of saving manifests itself in protection, liberation, ransom, cure, healing, health, victory, joy, life and peace.⁸ The Hebrew root ‘YS’ and its derivatives signify primarily the possession of space, and the freedom and security which is gained by the removal of constriction; ‘save’ frequently stands in antithesis to the root ‘SRR’ and its derivatives, which signify narrowness, constriction, straits. “He brought me out into a broad place— he set me free in the open,” says the Psalmist (Ps. 18: 19).⁹

Such was the concept of salvation in the OT and this background, together with its vocabulary and hope for a future salvation is the main factor in the creation and usage of the NT words *sozein*, *saviour* (*soter*), and *salvation* (*Soteria*).¹⁰ The absolute conviction of the OT was that it is Yahweh and only Yahweh who saves and the NT applies this saving activity to his Son, Jesus as well. The vocabulary of salvation permeates every page of the NT and hence we are not surprised when we hear, already at the birth of Jesus, the joyful angelic proclamation in Lk. 2:11: “I bring you good news of great joy which will come to all the people, for to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour”.

As we come now to John’s Gospel, we hear the same joyful faith proclamation:

“God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him” (3:17). “We have heard for ourselves and we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world” (4:42). “I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world” (12:47). Fully rooted

as John was in the OT and its hopes for salvation in all its dimensions, he proclaims that Jesus' mission was to fulfil those hopes and even to transcend them in an unexpected manner.

Two of the typical Johannine expressions elucidate his understanding of the salvation achieved by Jesus: "*the Hour of Jesus*" and his being "*Lifted up*" on the cross. The hour of Jesus is intrinsically related to, and in fact coincides with, his being *lifted up*. Jesus uses this enigmatic phrase thrice in John's gospel and each time with a particular nuance of meaning. The memory of the bronze serpent raised by Moses on a pole in the desert (Num 21:4-9) gives Jesus the first occasion to speak about his salvific death (Jn 3:14-15). The author of the Book of Wisdom had already brought out the deeper theological significance of the event in his midrashic comment on it when he affirmed that the people in the desert received a symbol and a token of salvation, and that whoever turned to it was saved, not by what he looked at, but by Yahweh, the Saviour of all (Wis 16:5-7). Taking up the theme of being lifted up, Jesus would affirm later that when the Jews have lifted up the Son of Man, then they would know his real identity as Messiah and Saviour (Jn 8:28). And finally in 12:32, Jesus proclaims the good news of salvation to all that when he is lifted up, he will continue and complete his salvific work of drawing all people to himself, thus showing conclusively that only as the lifted up one, he is the cause of salvation for all.

Jesus the Sacrament of Unity and Communion

This theme of Jesus as the sacrament of unity and communion is undoubtedly one of the greatest theological insights of Vatican II.¹¹ It is only in Christ that the Church claims herself to be a sacrament, a sign and instrument, of communion with God and of unity among all people.¹² Here, as with the rest of the best insights of the Council, she was only rediscovering her roots from the Bible and the teaching of the Johannine Jesus in particular. While recording the cynical, sarcastic and political statement of Caiphas, "It is better that one man dies for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed" (Jn 11:50), the eagle eyed vision of the Beloved Disciple really soars high and we have the typical Johannine theological comment: "He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God" (Jn.11:51-52). Jesus, the Giver of life is put to death, and John sees in that death, not only a life-giving self-offering, but a unifying role. John highlights here another aspect of the mission of Jesus, as an instrument and sign of unity and communion, not only on the vertical level with the Father, but also on the horizontal level, among all God's children.

Jesus as mediator of communion is a theme very dear to the heart of the beloved disciple. In Ch 10, while allegorically identifying himself as the good shepherd of the flock, we hear Jesus saying, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold; I must bring them also, so there will be one flock and one shepherd" (Jn10:16).¹³ This was the great dream and hope of Jesus that his life and ministry would bring in the desired unity among God's people, as they accept him in faith.

In the other great allegory of John's Gospel, Ch.15, on the vinegrower (the Father), the true vine (Jesus) and the branches (his disciples), we have also the same theme. The community of disciples are to be fruit-bearing branches, united with him, as he receives from the Father and shares with them the same life and love. And naturally enough, Jesus' teaching on the challenging new commandment of love, to love one another as he has loved us, and also his promise of the Paraclete find their clearest expression in this context of unity.

Jesus' Mission, the Manifestation of the Father's Love

With this theme, we come to the final and the most important aspect of the mission of Jesus according to John. Traditionally the 4th Gospel has been known as the gospel of love, due to the fact that Jesus teaches and commands his disciples to follow his new commandment of love. But a still better reason for such a title would be the Johannine insistence, time and again, that Jesus came to show his Father's love to us and his love for the Father. Probably the most famous

phrase in John's gospel is "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (Jn 3:16). Jesus is thus the final and finest sign and expression of the heavenly Father's love for humankind and Jesus' mission was to manifest that love. At the end of the first part of the farewell discourse Jesus could affirm that "I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father"(Jn 14:31). Though we can and we have spoken about various ways of understanding the way of Christ and his mission towards us, finally it must be affirmed that Jesus is the sign, a tangible, visible, and audible sign of the Father's eternal and unconditional love for the world.

In the solemn opening of the second part of the Gospel, (Jn 13:1), we are told that the hour had come for Jesus to return to his Father. Then John adds the unforgettable line that "Jesus having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them *eis telos*, to the end, a phrase that can be and has been interpreted to mean to the end of his life, to the end of our life, to the end of the world, to the extreme limit possible, a love without limit and conditions and boundaries, a love without end and a love that would achieve its final purpose and goal. All that Jesus would do and say and suffer from now on in the upper room, in the garden, during the trials by Jewish and Roman authorities, the way of the cross and death on the cross are especially signs of that *agape eis telos*, love to the end and love without end.

Such then, was the mission and work of Jesus according to John; a life at the service of life, truth, freedom, salvation, unity and, above all, of love for humankind.¹⁴ Jesus remained faithful to that mission, and completed the work that his Father had given him to do and hence at the end of his earthly pilgrimage, he could cry out in a total serene surrender and with a sense of fulfilment and achievement, "It is consummated" (Jn 19:30)¹⁵.

The Johannine Understanding of the Mission of the Church

Having seen in some detail the typical Johannine vision of the mission of Jesus, now we shall take a quick look at the mission of the Church and how we can fulfil that mission in our actual historical context. As we have seen above (1.1), for John the mission of the Church cannot be anything else than a participation in and a continuation of the very same mission of Jesus: as the Father had sent him, so did he send us (17: 18 and 20: 21).

Mission as the Easter Gift of the Risen Lord

What is remarkable about the mission text of John is that he sees it as an Easter gift! When Jesus met his disciples on Easter Sunday evening (Jn 20:19-23), he gave them three gifts: his peace, ('peace be with you' 20:19); his mission ('as the Father has sent me, so I send you' 20: 21) and his Spirit ('receive the Holy Spirit' 20:22). Thus we see how the command and invitation, the task and the gift of mission is put right in the Centre of a triple Easter gift by the glorious Lord: we are invited to carry forward, to continue and to participate in his mission filled as we are with his *shalom*, in the abiding activity and consoling presence of his Spirit.¹⁶

Some Concluding Remarks

a. Thus we see there is no single and uniform way of looking at the mission of Christ and hence the mission of the Church in John's gospel, and much less in the NT as a whole. Each author looks at the person and work of Christ from his own particular perspective highlighting different aspects of his work. Limiting ourselves to the 4th Gospel alone in this paper, We see how some key theological words and themes capture the mission theology of John.

b. Each view of mission is correct and yet, incomplete at the same time.¹⁷ Exaggerating and over-emphasising one particular view against the others would be a disservice to the

richness of the Johannine and the NT vision of mission. It may be good to recall that as in the Father's house (Jn 14:2), so also in the mission field, there are many rooms and approaches!

c. A particular missionary, or a diocese, or a religious congregation may opt to highlight and emphasize one of these aspects. The two great post-conciliar documents on the mission, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* of Paul VI in 1975 and *Redemptoris Missio* of John Paul II in 1990 have taught us the different dimensions, aspects and paths of mission and the need for what is called a pastoral priority.

d. One who is deeply committed to the ideals of liberation theology might highlight the Johannine vision of truth and freedom as the key to mission, while another may opt for the *Koinonia*, communion, and unity and dialogue aspects of mission. To create and nurture life, to cherish and sustain it in all forms, might be the choice of another in imitation of Jesus who came that we "may have life and have it in abundance".

e. And hence a polarization and an irreconcilable confrontation within the church –whether in an ecclesiastical unit or between religious congregations– to mission is undesirable and uncalled for and in the long run counterproductive. Each evangelizer can and should take inspiration from the lovely example of Barnabas in Acts 11:23: "When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced"! For finally we are all "united with Christ on Mission" and are "Servants of Christ's Mission"¹⁸ Or in Johannine terms, the Father is still working (Jn 5:17), and hence Jesus is working and we are invited and commissioned, privileged and set apart to participate in and continue that divine activity and mission for the growth of the Kingdom, "an eternal and universal kingdom: a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace"¹⁹

Notes:

1. In chapter 17, Jesus with an intimate awareness and consciousness, defines himself at least six times as the one who is Sent by the Father. 17.3,8,18,21,23,25.
2. These five characteristics - sense of mission, listening, contemplation, dependent action and imitation - of Jesus the Apostle in John are highlighted by Carlo M. Martini in his address to the USIG members 1981.
3. See especially Chs. 3,4,5,6,10,11 and 17.
4. This unforgettable expression is used by the Pope, John Paul II, to describe our modern society !
5. The Greek word used here by John is 'another' with a double meaning.
6. See the provocative and insightful title of the Book by Ignacio Ellacuria, S.J, *Freedom Made Flesh: the Mission of Christ and the Church*, Maryknoll, NY.: Orbis, 1976.
7. Peter Van Breemen, S.J., *Let All God's Glory Through*, Bombay: St. Paul's, p.60.
8. For some of the ideas expressed in this section on salvation, I am indebted to: Xavier Leon Duffer, S.J. (ed.), *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1973, p518ff and John L.McKenzie , S.J. *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975, p760 ff.
9. As suggested by J.L.McKenzie and J.Pedersen, we can get the basic OT vocabulary of salvation in Ps. 91.
10. In secular Greek and Hellenistic literature, the title soter, saviour, was used for several gods and Goddesses: Zeus, Hercules, Serapes,0 Isis, and in particular to Asklepios the healer, and also to emperors and kings.

11. The Council, especially in *Lumen Gentium*, had made her own the pioneering work and teaching of modern theologians, notably, E.Schillebeeckx, O.P and K Rahner S.J, on this important theme and showed the close relation and link between Christ the Sacrament of God and the Church as the Sacrament of Christ.

12. See LG. No.1.

13. A Strange coincidence that today, 21st April, 1997, is Monday of the 4th week of Easter, and the Gospel chosen for today is precisely Jn 10.11-18!

14. The theme chosen for the Asian Synod of Bishops in preparation for the Great Jubilee 2000 A.D, reads very much like a summary of the main Johannine concerns: "Jesus Christ the Saviour and His mission of love and service in Asia...that they may have life and have it abundantly".

15. See the moving prayer of the Breviary: "we pray for those who have gone before us, signed with the sign of the cross-may they rise with Christ in power when his voice resounds again through the universe, 'It is consummated'(Week 3 Friday, Evening Prayer, last intercession)

16. Jesus had already spoken about these three gifts during his farewell discourses: About Peace, 14.27;16.33; about the Spirit-Paraclete, 14.16-17; 14.26; 15;26; 16.7-14; and about the mission of the Church, in 17.18.

17. I think the Oft-repeated story of the seven blind men trying to describe an elephant from each one's particular point of view is very appropriate when we try to explain the mystery of God's revelation!

18. These are the titles of the decrees of the 34th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus.

19. Preface for the Mass the Christ the King.

Ref.: *Third Millenium*, Vol.2, n.4 (October-December), 1999, pp.49-58.