

Who are the real activists?

Phil Jump suggests businesses are the real activists, not those who make the most noise.

“Climate Activists” have commanded the headlines quite a lot in recent months, which is something of an achievement in itself, given the media’s pre-occupation with ‘Brexit’. But as I watch the various acts of protest, disruption and street theatre, it leaves me with the underlying question – what constitutes an “activist”?

I recognise that I am courting controversy here, so let me say from the outset that I unreservedly recognise the need for a collective endeavour to combat Global Warming. Furthermore, my Christian faith, with its portrayal of humanity as the responsible stewards of God’s Creation, strongly reinforces that conviction.

So why would I have any kind of hang-up with “activism”? Well the simple truth is that when their protests are over, the police overtime bills have been paid and their placards and banners are consuming even more fossil fuels in our recycling plants, I am left with the question – what has actually changed? What are the real outcomes of this outpouring of middle-class outrage? Does being a “Climate activist” require us to do something that physically reduces the scope of global warming, or is it enough to simply make a fuss?

From a faith perspective, I am particularly intrigued by the way in which Greta Thunberg, the Swedish teenager who has increasingly become the public face of this movement, has been compared to a messiah figure, equating climate activism to a religion. One of many such examples is Madeline Grant in the Daily Telegraph (September 2019), who described her as the religion’s “first saint”,

highlighting numerous parallels between the public reactions to Ms. Thunberg and veneration of Medieval Christianity¹.

But if we are to carry the religious comparisons forward, it is perhaps the words of the New Testament epistle of James that summarise my own concerns. “Faith . . . unaccompanied by action is dead”. The street protestors might well argue that this is precisely why they do what they do, but as they berate contemporary society for its complete inaction, this requires a significant ignoring of the actions of many other people.

The Website Greenmatch² reports that between 2009 and 2017, before Ms. Thunberg rose to international fame, renewable energy production in the UK grew by 230% and now accounts for over 30% of our total energy consumption. Yes, there is still a long way to go, and we must not be complacent, but nor can we be accused of doing nothing. And the simple truth is that this turnaround was achieved, not because people took to the streets, but because people went to work. Electrical engineers laboured over new designs for batteries, achieving storage and charging capacities that would have been unimaginable a decade ago; marine and structural engineers have designed and installed offshore turbines that defy the weather conditions on which their operation relies. Some of those that Ms. Thunberg berates for robbing her of her childhood, have spent much of the last 17 years coming up with real and sustainable solutions to our climate crisis.

I make this point, not because I want to make easy swipes at the Extinction Rebellion movement, but rather to challenge the equally unfair swipes that are directed at the corporate world. It is true that industrialisation and unfettered economic expansion have done much to harm our environment. But it is the world of industry that is designing and manufacturing real solutions and is largely responsible for the kind of research and development upon which any dreams of being “carbon neutral” will be hugely reliant.

It seems to me that the mantra “Faith in Business” not only calls us to explore the theological connections between our industrial endeavours and our understanding of the Divine, but also to display that human quality of seeking out and celebrating what is good within the business sector. The climate emergency is not a call for a pitched battle between protest movements and industrialists, but a sign of the need for creative and serious partnership to find solutions. This is more likely to be accomplished by celebrating some of the achievements already made, not by finding new media icons to tell us what we already know.

So in the midst of our justifiable and necessary concern, I hope that we can find the time to celebrate and affirm those many designers, engineers and researchers whose collective endeavours represent a 21st century response to the ancient call of Genesis to steward and renew God’s gift of creation. Might I suggest that the real “activists” are those who make the solutions, not those who only make a noise. 📺

1 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/09/28/greta-thunberg-first-saint-cruel-new-environmental-religion/>

2 <https://www.greenmatch.co.uk/blog/2018/03/renewable-energy-in-the-united-kingdomamers.community/7spheres> and Landa Cope, An Introduction to the Old Testament Template: Rediscovering God’s Principles for Discipling All Nations, The Template Institute Press, 2006.



Phil Jump is Chair of Industrial Christian Fellowship and Regional Minister of the North Western Baptist Association. He entered Christian Ministry after a career in marine engineering and is married to Janice. They live in north Liverpool and have three children.