INTERCULTURAL MINISTRY IS COMPLEX

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Some thoughts based on a well intentioned,
but badly thought through gesture.
Category: Observations

Over recent years it has become popular to illuminate landmarks in solidarity with particular causes. The photo below is of Penshaw Monument in my home town (you always know you are home when you can see Penshaw) lit up in blue to celebrate NHS workers during the pandemic.



I rather like this. OK, I wouldn't necessarily support all of the causes that are celebrated in this way, but I understand that the motivation is well-meaning. And who doesn't like a model of the Parthenon lit up in blue in the North East of England.

Except it isn't that simple.

Recently, as you can see by the photograph at the top of of this post, Battersea Power Station in London was illuminated in purple as a reminder of Holocaust Memorial Day. Except they lit up the chimneys. You don't have to be an expert in the iconography of the Second World War and the Holocaust to see how this could cause offence. The response on Twitter was predictable.

https://twitter.com/barnyskinner/status/1488229771087687687

I am convinced that the people responsible for lighting up Battersea were well meaning. Rather than cause offence, they wanted to show solidarity with the people who suffered so much during the holocaust.

However, one simple slip turned what could have been a lovely, supportive gesture into a rather offensive one.

There is a lesson for those of us involved in cross-cultural ministry here. The thing is, it is very easy to make this sort of mistake, even if our mistakes are rarely this publicly visible (thankfully). It is one thing to offend people because there are aspects of the gospel that are inherently offensive to all people and quite another to offend people because we are British, American or whatever and insensitive to the culture and values of the people that we are working with. To get a tad controversial, I would argue that people are more likely to hang on to the aspects of their own culture that offend their host culture and moderate their presentation of the gospel, than they are to do the opposite.

Our presentation of the gospel needs to be robust and Biblical, but it needs to be informed by and relevant to our host culture and this applies in 21st century Britain as much as anywhere else.