

1 Corinthians 1:3 – 9 refs to Isa 64

Waiting and Watching

[Play “Alert” bugle call through computer or digital hymnal] The bugle call “Alert” – is sounded on bigger ships more often than not as a salute, or to return a salute from a passing ship, but would originally have been literally an alert call in anticipation of danger. Waiting and watching – we’re really not that great at doing either – waiting can be boring, and watching (particularly if there is nothing much happening) is apt to be a real strain on our concentration. It has been said that we are in greatest danger when we have no idea that there is any immediate danger. Advent is a time of preparation for the coming of Christ – his first coming we celebrate at Christmas, his coming again – we tend to put very much in the background – but it is part of Advent.

Missing an “alert” of the salute variety is not the end of the world but failing to be alert to real danger whether it be in the home, on the road or in any other walk of life can be far more serious – potentially devastating. Without wishing to alarm you, far less freeze you into inaction due to worry or panic I think it only right that we take to heart Paul’s encouragement to the Corinthians to be alert – to be watchful and to wait expectantly and with purpose.

Active Waiting

We live in an age that demands everything almost instantly. We hate to be kept waiting. We get quite worked up at delays – whether it be a bus or train late in arriving or a parcel or tradesman who didn’t come when expected. Our family have been very fortunate in receiving very prompt medical attention since we came to live in Montrose but obviously it can be extremely worrying if delays impact upon our health. Paul encourages his readers to be thankful for all the blessings they have received, and he has a lot to say about just how extensive he believes these blessings to be. It is perhaps a case of our needing to heed the old injunction to “Count your blessings, name them one by one.” We’ve also to make use of the spiritual provision God has made for us now rather than wishing our lives away in the hope that things might be better for us in the future. As with so many things, God often teaches us so much as we learn to cope with difficulties and pressures – and let’s face it, there are an awful lot of those around just now. He develops our capacity for love, for grace, for forgiveness and faith as we learn to trust him, as we apply our faith in the rough and tumble of everyday life. We are not commodities, machines. He doesn’t just dump a heap of “faith” at our front door that will solve all our problems in one go. He works in our lives, he develops our characters in a whole variety of ways, often as we rise to the challenges in our lives and as we learn to respond to his love. Quite often, it is a gradual change (and not without hitches) but if we are open to God’s lead we are far more likely to cultivate Christ-like qualities and traits that are long lasting and permanent.

Waiting can be very difficult – especially when there’s a lot of uncertainty. Waiting to hear the results of tests be they from hospital or school. Waiting the outcome of job applications or the outcome of “reorganisation.” All these are stressful, and we have very limited control over any of them. Waiting for your wedding day or for the arrival of a baby – these waits are more exciting and there is scope for a lot more activity – things to do to prepare to the coming event. I am in no doubt that Paul wanted to encourage the Corinthian Christians (and us) to be alert, to be actively waiting, waiting with energy and expectancy, using the time until Christ’s return to good effect, preparing themselves so that they were ready to welcome the heavenly King. I have commented to several people about how quickly Christmas comes round after Remembrance Sunday. The final six weeks of the year rush by and it’s on you before you know. If you are a lists person, then I expect you have begun that process already, listing what needs to be done so that you are all ready for Christmas. If you are not, then I expect it is beginning to dawn upon you that there isn’t that long to go and that you will need to get your skates on. Waiting is a time of opportunity – as Christians we are to use all the gifts we’ve been given, including the gift of time, the gift of waiting to ready ourselves for Jesus – whether it is to celebrate his birth and his coming among us at Bethlehem, or looking ahead, to his return and heaven. The time we have (over the next few weeks until the 25th December or until we leave this mortal coil) is a gift from God to be used for his glory. We are called to make the best possible use of it – neither wishing it away (wanting all our waiting to be over) nor becoming so frenetic in our activity that we fail to see Christ in our midst and fail to avail ourselves of the opportunities to share in his work. Yes, sometimes we do have to wait too long – but not all waiting is a waste of time. And if we have the correct attitude waiting WITH God as well as FOR God it’s never a waste of time. Waiting is never twiddling thumbs with God – he always has a reason for it, and he always has something for us to do. Active waiting is a virtue and can be a real blessing. And yes, if we are not fit enough to be up and doing then we can be actively waiting in prayer!

Watching

Yes, there is watching and watching. There is the careful and concerned looking out for a sick or infirm neighbour and there is sheer nosiness. There is staring into space and there is a purposeful watchfulness that is alert for potential danger. On board ship a lookout of the first variety is no use to anyone – indeed is a hindrance to safety as he or she gives the appearance that the risks are being managed when in fact the opposite is true. Everyone on board whether professionals or passengers would like to think that the lookout(s) and watch keepers were alert and attentive and will sleep more soundly in their bed if they believe them to be so. And in some conditions, even in this age of technology, we still require people who can make use of the “Mark one eyeball!” Spiritually too, we need to be watchful. Not in a panicky way and certainly not in a careless way but watchful – alert to what is going on around us, in our community, in wider society. Concerned about the moral and spiritual dangers that confront people and which make it more (rather than

less) difficult for people to experience the love of God in Christ and live lives that are pleasing to him. We've to take care not to panic people or cry wolf, nor simply be negative and condemning but as Christians we have a responsibility to alert people to danger and to seek to keep people safe. We can't do that if we are not in tune with both God and with people around us. Active watching will require us to be deeply involved with our neighbours, genuinely interested in their welfare, very much the good neighbour in its deepest and biblical sense – and to have a rounded faith that is not trite or mechanical but vibrant and alive – that flows from a real and on-going experience of Jesus. No one will listen we just bang the drum and criticise. More people will heed us if they see that we love them, that are actions bear out our words. I remember as a young cadet being asked “Where is the nearest point of danger?” and replying, after a look at the radar and the chart, “the rocks near the lighthouse 3 miles on the port bow.” “No” said the Officer of the Watch, “the nearest point of danger is two fathoms below the keel!” I never forgot that and it's something every navigator needs to remember. It is a reminder to all of us that we require to be watchful and that danger, physical or spiritual, may come from unexpected quarters and be a lot nearer home than we imagine.

Paul sounds his alert – not to panic us but to encourage us – to be active in our waiting, to be watchful – to make the fullest use of all the many blessings that we have in Christ, to involve ourselves positively in the world around us, loving and serving our neighbours as we share in the telling out and living out of the gospel in the time we have been given, using the opportunities, the gifts and talents, for the benefit of all those around us and ultimately for God's glory.

Waiting can be tough, watching can be boring but both can be vital in the cause of the kingdom. Be alert, be watchful, let your waiting be active and purposeful.

God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ is faithful and he will keep you strong to the end that you will be blameless on the day of Christ.

May the Lord bless you! Amen.