

Wait, Watch, be Alert

Waiting and watching is not easy and has not been easy for the church as the church has looked and expected the Lord to return. The first believers expected Jesus to return soon, any day now – and if not today, then tomorrow... any day now... perhaps tomorrow. They waited and watched and... *'any time now'*.

Waiting is something that most people don't enjoy. What about seeing a long queue that you are going to have to wait in? You look at your watch, wondering if you've got time to wait. The queue at such places as theme parks, where there are all those fast and furious rides, give you an indication of how long you are likely to be waiting to get in. There are signposts all along the way of the queue: "If you are standing here, you have approximately 1hr 30min. to wait!"

Waiting outside the headmaster's office for *allegedly* having done something wrong can be an uncomfortable wait. *If you don't know what it's like then believe me it's not a pleasant wait!* I wouldn't know it's just what others have told me!!! I'd rather wait for an hour at the theme park than 10 minutes outside any headmaster's office!

There are longer spells of waiting than this of course. Some people have to wait for days and sometimes for weeks to get the results of tests done in hospital. While waiting 1hr 30min can seem long, waiting a week for blood test results is a long long long time.

We used to order things and they'd be delivered in a week or two – nowadays we have come to expect our deliveries to arrive the next day. We don't like to wait.

The Book of Revelation was written to the churches encouraging Christians to *'endure with patience'*.

Christians were assured that their suffering was not in vain. The Book of Revelation speaks of the closeness of God in our enduring; of the comfort of God in wiping away every tear; and of the reward of God in glory. Whatever you are facing, the faith message is 'endure with patience, endure with courage, endure believing and with hope.' Trust in Jesus always.

I know people, and you probably do too, who have had to endure difficulty and hardship. Watching them we have wondered, "How do they cope?"

Paul's letter to the church in Rome was written c.57 or 58AD at a time when Christianity was not acceptable to the Roman Empire and at a time when Christian persecution and martyrdom were common place; and when there was a call for great courage. Paul opens the door for us on hardship and the kind of patience we need to endure whatever comes our way. Hardship wears a 'new look' in Paul's writings. Paul states that a Christian sees hardship differently because of faith in Jesus. Paul is not proposing anything Stoic here, about *enduring hardship with a stiff upper lip!* No! By the grace of God in our hearts our hardships wear a new look and instead of being meaningless, our hardships breed patience, the unique brand of patience, which Jesus displayed, a patience borne of faith in God.

Previously troubles and hardships might have been viewed as meaningless, fruitless and pointless. *Suffering in vain!* Paul turns that around and helps us to find gems buried deep within hardship's murky waters. The love of God, Paul detects, brings light to darkness and hope to despair. Paul is saying that in our darkest moments and in our deepest despair we find God, the God of grace and hope, light and life.

This was not a philosophical note for the Romans to contemplate. This was a letter written to people in the midst of serious trials and the most bloody tribulations. They were to put this to the test and to put it into practice. Some may think, 'this sounds like denial of how difficult and painful hardships can be... and some may think that finding anything purposeful in difficult hardships is sheer pretence.'

Paul is proposing a new way, not a way of his own making, nor of his own ingenuity. He is proposing what he had found to be the case in his own life of hardship and persecution. He is writing from experience. What Paul found was God's grace in his heart where it had not existed before. Paul found a peace and a calm when in the past he might have expected to find fear and dread. Paul found patience and endurance in his heart in the face of trials and tribulations - in the past he would have found the situation to be terrifying and hopeless. When he might have been thinking, 'What a waste!'

In the midst of all his trials and tribulations Paul stated that he found God's strength, grace and patience. And this, he says is what makes the difference. What gave Paul, the martyrs, and all those who endure hardship their patience and their courage was the fact that God was with them – and they knew it. They knew God to be with them and as Paul told the Christians in Rome: *'all things God works for the good of those who love the lord, who have been called according to his purpose...'*

Elsewhere in this letter to the Romans Paul writes, *"Who then, can separate us from the love of Christ? Can trouble do it, or hardship, or persecution, or hunger or poverty or danger or death? NO, in all these things we have complete victory through him who loved us! For I am certain that nothing can separate us from his love: neither death nor life, neither angels nor other heavenly rulers or powers, neither the present nor the future, neither the world above nor the world below - there is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord."* Powerful, powerful words, borne of experience, and of his experience – words true to life!

You might be thinking, *'other people without faith in God seem to endure hardships courageously, and endure their course with what seems like patience and dignity.'* True! But I wonder if, in their heart of hearts, they don't think their situation to be meaningless, pointless and fruitless. Whereas to the Christian there is purpose and hope. As St. Paul said, *"More than this: we even exult in our present sufferings, because we know that suffering is the source of endurance, endurance of approval, and approval of hope. Such hope is no fantasy; through the Holy Spirit he has given us, God's love has flooded our hearts."* Absolutely not pointless then! To the Christian, such hardships are full of purpose, meaning, and full of promise!

Paul tells of the way things used to be without hope compared to the way of life: good and bad, blessings and suffering with faith in Christ, which offers hope. For example, Paul likens the Christian's suffering to the suffering of labour pains. There is great purpose.

No matter what we face, be it trouble, hardship, persecution, hunger, poverty, danger or even death, as followers of Jesus we are to be certain that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God, which is now ours through Christ Jesus. Whatever you face, rest assured, Jesus is with you.