

## Be Alert

Readings: Isaiah 64:1-9; 1 Cor 1:3-9 & Mark 13: 24-37

I grew up with dogs. They used to sleep on my bed... when mum wasn't looking. We used to play chasing around the orchard - I was on the motorbike and he ran after me, trying to take short cuts and be waiting for me at the next corner.

But one of the things I remember most about one dog in particular was that when I came home from school he was always waiting for me. We lived at the foot of the Moutere Hill and I took my bike for the short ride from Maisey's road down to my home. And as I flew down the road, always hiding in the long grass, I saw the ears and then eyes of my dog. Ready to race me back to the house.

Now it's true the dog knew where and when about I was coming. My mum told me that around 2:30pm everyday he would trot up to his spot ready for my arrival. But sometimes I was late, sometimes early and he was always there - ready alert expecting... excited. He'd see me coming then wait for the last second before racing me home. We both never got sick of the game.

He didn't do it because he had to do it. He wasn't trained or coerced. He did it because it brought him joy - dog joy. Sometimes the best joy there is.

This joy contrasts sharply with our gospel reading this morning which is pretty bleak. What may make it even harder is that these words are recorded as Jesus' own words; speaking of future events that are harrowing. The sun darkened, stars fallen, powers in heaven shaken! But when this occurs so too the Son of Man comes in great power. Which we hope is a good thing for us - right? Because he will be sending out his angels to gather his chosen ones throughout the earth and heaven. Interesting that it is both heaven and earth the angel travels to.

The sense we have here is that these events are going to happen whether we like it or not. But Jesus doesn't leave us in this uncertainty regarding the events. And although no one actually knows when Christ will return - not even the angels in heaven - Jesus instructs us to be on guard and stay alert! Stay alert and be on guard for what? Knowing *when* Christ is going to return isn't important. There is actually something far more important for us. An attitude, a state of mind we need to have.

So what is the point of being on guard - staying alert? Because we don't know *when* Christ will return. We could be waiting our entire life, like all the generations before us. We could be like my dog waiting for me to return only for me never to turn up. It could create a sense of anxiety and apprehension. 'When will Jesus arrive? How do we interpret signs - which signs mean he is coming...?'

And we can easily imagine Jesus figuring out how distracted people could become from his words so he adds this story of a man going away for a very long time and leaving his servants instructions for what they need to do in his absence. Stay alert.

Similar instructions are seen in Matt 25:13-14, Luke 12:35-40, Rom. 13:11, Eph.6:17-18, Col.4:2, 1 Thess.5:6.

In the Matthew account we have the master leaving three servants three different amounts of money - *according to their ability*. The point of the story isn't in how to make money. The point was that these servants weren't sitting around for their master to return. They had a work to do and two of them got on with that. The third didn't.

The point I believe these passages tell us is that there will be times when things are hard - really hard. And if we aren't focused on the work Jesus has for us to do; if we don't stay alert regarding our work we will easily get distracted or disillusioned or worse deluded in our faith

The point isn't to look busy just when the boss returns. But rather to be doing what we should be doing regardless of when the boss returns. Not to try and pre-empt his return. But do and be the people we need to be all the time. To live the life God wants us to live.

And here's the most important point. The things we should be doing as servants of God are things that give us life, excitement and satisfaction. A life full of challenge but also pleasure. A life of fulfilment but also incredible peace.

Do you think that it is something many Christians have forgotten? We tend to do things out of obligation or duty or even guilt. We live lives in a sense of inner criticism of not measuring up and so we do things in order to make ourselves feel better or worthwhile. Or when people think of church activities there sometimes needs to be a real incentive to get people involved - what's in it for me? Otherwise they aren't interested. Will I be entertained or happy - is food included? Will my "sacrifice of time and effort" be seen as faithfulness - even though I really don't want to do it?

Now I know everything we do isn't always a box of roses. Some people sing for joy while cleaning the bathroom - others don't. Some people love gardening, others hate it. Some people love being with lots of other people, others like being alone more. Sometimes we need to do things regardless of how we feel about it. But overall God intends for us to reap good things; like joy and peace and love... For believers we have a different outlook - even with the most menial of tasks.

For a start - all the things we do should be done out of gratitude and thankfulness and joyfulness. Not because of what we can get out of things for ourselves, but because of what God has already given us. This changes everything for us. We help others because we are thankful. We give generously because our lives are satisfied. We may even put up with hassles and trials because we see that doing so benefits others more than ourselves.

And all of this is underpinned by not only what Christ has done for us, but who God is - Almighty God. This reality of who God is in our life overpowers all other realities for us. It fills us with incredible joy... well it should, shouldn't it?

And perhaps joy more than anything else is the thing missing in churches the most today. Joy that fills our life with light and life. Joy that is contagious. Joy that sees through the hard times and knows a greater reality than the reality we sometimes

experience. This joy isn't manmade. It isn't conjured up through denying problems or getting our own way all the time. It is a deep divine joy - like the peace and love this faith offers all people.

So often we have heard that people going to church look like they've sucked lemons - they look so miserable. And if that doesn't put people off church nothing will. And then again there are those who almost seem to need to get manic - to jump up and down and almost command people to be happy. But the joy of the Lord is a deep inner state of joyfulness. It is a gladness in something or Someone beyond our circumstance or situation. This joy isn't an in-your-face-be-happy-and-clap-your-hands-and-jump-up-and-down. It is a deep sense of pleasure, wholeness and satisfaction in the goodness of God in our life and our life being utterly fulfilled because of this reality.

As we wait and remain alert to what God is doing in the world. We continue to do the work God has called us to do. Knowing this will bring us the greatest joy in life. We don't compare ourselves against others to make us feel better or worse about ourselves. We don't even compare ourselves against our own expectations and let this dictate to us. We work faithfully, humbly, joyfully...

We keep on guard to follow Christ and the way he has shown us to live. We are alert and expectant and even if or when God seems distant - even if the answers we so desperately seek don't happened immediately (maybe like church growth) - or even if the world starts falling apart... our eyes remain on God. Our hope is in God. The work we do is for God. The joy of this life is found in Christ alone.

So today, this afternoon, this week. As we begin our Advent season, let us take time to see if the life we live fills us with the joy God offers us. Let this joy glow from within and bring life to our days. Stay alert, Be on guard and pray.