

Action Stations

On Saturday 17th April, 2021, following a ceremonial royal funeral which had been scaled back due to COVID-19 restrictions, HRH Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, was laid to rest. One part of his funeral I found particularly interesting near the end of the service (and remarked upon by many commentators) was the point where buglers sounded what is called 'Action Stations'. This harked back to Prince Philip's career in the Navy as a young man. When 'Action Stations' were sounded, it was a call to all serving on the ship, whether on or off duty, that danger was potentially imminent, and to adopt a battle footing. Many commentators that day said it was Prince Philip's way of saying to the Royal Family, in keeping with his often direct manner of speaking, 'Right, I have passed away, we've had a period of mourning and the funeral today, it is now time to get back to work.' I found this all very relatable to the interruption COVID-19 had brought into all our lives, and to our service for God in some cases, and I similarly felt God prompting me along the same kind of lines – 'COVID-19 has been here, it has caused devastation (and still is doing so in many countries), but for those who have come through in good health, it is time to get active and serving once more.'

In Galatians 6:9 we read the following well known words: 'And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.' If we stop and consider the restrictions and limitations that COVID-19 has placed upon all our lives over nearly two years now, there surely are reasons why we may indeed have felt discouraged and weary.

We may have become weary in our **SURROUNDINGS**. For nearly two years now, we have been spending close to 100% of our time at home – with our homes in many cases serving as our place of residence, place of work and place of worship – during the long periods of lockdowns and shorter 'circuit breakers'. As someone has observed, we're not so much 'working from home' as 'living at work' - where the demarcation lines between home and work lives have become blurred. Whilst being at home all the time is, of course, a lot more bearable for those of us with cosy, comfortable houses and a nice garden at the front, it is a lot less fun if you're living in a small apartment, with limited space, and if you have no garden of your own providing a green oasis to relax in.

We may have grown weary in our **STRUGGLES**. The past two years have been challenging in so many ways. The struggle to adapt to the isolation of working from home, with the corresponding loss of social contact. The struggle to remain motivated, when every day feels like Groundhog Day. The struggle to keep in touch with people, and to avoid being forgotten! The struggle to share your faith with others at a time when so much social contact has been shut down. And the struggle biblical Christianity faces today when those in public life can face howls of anger for even sharing a Christian opinion, never mind actually voicing it yourself. It can feel like Christianity is neither welcome nor wanted, and that you are expected to leave your Christian faith and beliefs firmly outside the door.

And we may also have grown weary at the **SEEMING LACK OF RESULTS**. In so many areas of Christian service it may seem little progress is being made, few coming to faith in Christ, with indifference and indeed outright antagonism towards Christian belief and principles on the increase.

So, given all this, what could – and should – our response be?

We need to **REDEEM** (invest and make the best use of) the time, because the days in which we live demand it. 'Wherefore (God) saith, Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light. See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.' (Eph 5:14-16) If we won't act as salt and light, and as God's hands and feet, who will? The words of Jesus in John 9:4 are always a challenge: 'I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work.' A few months ago, I watched a film based on a true story where a married mum of two, facing terminal cancer, had sought to help prepare her husband for life without her, and bringing up their two sons on his own. One of her pieces of advice to him was 'make the most of every day.' That is something many of us in full health can easily fail to do, despite the uncertainty and brevity of life.

In 1843 the Charles Dickens' classic, 'A Christmas Carol', was first published. It recounts the story of Ebenezer Scrooge, a mean and selfish man, who is visited by the spirits of Christmas Past, Present and Yet to Come, and shown all too clearly how his miserly ways have not only impoverished his life and been to his own detriment in the past and present, but (if unchanged) will lead to him dying unmissed and unlamented, with few, if any, caring. After their visits, Scrooge is transformed into a much kinder, gentler man. Whilst 'A Christmas Carol' is largely a morality tale, the lesson it teaches has much merit. The poor choices we make, our actions – or inaction – have a bearing on our past, present and future. If there are things that need to be put right, the time to do so is right now.

We also need to remember all those still to be **REACHED**. In John 4:35-36 the Lord Jesus said: 'Say not ye, There are yet four months, and then cometh harvest? behold, I say unto you, Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest. And he that reapeth receiveth wages, and gathereth fruit unto life eternal: that both he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice together.' The enemy may try to discourage us by saying God isn't moving – but the devil is the Father of lies (Jn 8:44) and not worth listening to. We just need to faithfully hang in there, sow the seed, pray over what we do, and then leave the results to God.

And we need to encourage ourselves that there will be an ultimate **REWARD**. '... in due season we shall reap, **if** we faint not.' (as that already quoted verse from Galatians 6:9 shows us). That 'due season' may be a while in coming, but it is still promised. And, if we were each able to see even one more soul brought into the kingdom of God, wouldn't all the labour still be totally worthwhile?

So the call to each of us in the CSCU is – Action Stations – let us return to the battle, knowing that the battle belongs to the LORD. Here are four short 'action points' that may help us to do just that. For ease of memory, they all rhyme.

Keep on **GOING**. The ebb and flow of the tides in our seas and oceans is essential to the balance of life therein. Without the tides, these bodies of water would soon simply stagnate, devastating the marine life they contain. Motion is vital to life and progress. COVID-19 restrictions have led to us being housebound and static to a degree we hadn't been before, and how quickly we can get used to doing less. How important that we once again 'run the race' (Heb 12:1) and 'press towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.' (Phil 3:14)

Keep on **GROWING**. With more people now having multiple different jobs during their working lives, or possibly completely switching careers at some point, in educational circles you will often hear the term 'lifelong learning', where new skills or knowledge need to be acquired to slot into different roles. This applies to the spiritual realm too. Whether you have been a Christian for five weeks or 50 years, there never comes a point where you know it all. The Bible is an inexhaustible treasure trove of wisdom, counsel and encouragement, whose depths you could never plumb in many lifetimes. Keep on reading it, keep on studying it, and keep on learning and being taught by it (2 Tim 3:16-17 & 2:15). 'But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ ...' (2 Pet 3:18)

Keep on **SOWING**. The seemingly endless restrictions upon our lives that COVID-19 ushered in have of course greatly impacted on normal gospel outreach. Yet, even if we are right at home, there are still things we can do. Lift the telephone; drop someone an e-mail or write them a letter; share a thought, bible verse or inspirational quote via social media. I know during lockdowns I was glad that Facebook allowed me to still reach out to many people, none of whom I could see in person! Where there is a will, and with a little thought, there is always a way. And, as already quoted, '... in due season we *shall* reap, *if* we faint not.' (Gal 6:9)

Keep on **SHOWING** something of the love of God to others. Whilst good works can never earn our salvation (Eph 2:8-9, Titus 3:5), they are nonetheless the outward manifestation of it (Mt 5:14-16). And keep **SHOWING** up at the place of prayer. The passage in Genesis 18:17-33, where Abraham prayed to God over Sodom and Gomorrah, amply illustrates the power of intercessory prayer. But, in contrast, how sad are the words of Ezekiel 22:30 – 'And I sought for a man among them, that should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before me for the land, that I should not destroy it: *but I found none.*' Will *you* be the person who will 'stand in the gap', pray, and make a real difference?

Routine and momentum are so key to our daily lives, and nothing has underscored this more clearly than the disruption and interruption COVID-19 has had on both. Weak human nature is such that good habits are hard to establish, and all too easily broken or abandoned, whilst bad habits can take hold so easily, though prove a lot harder to root out. Perhaps this is where you are today? You may have fallen into an unproductive rut, and lament the fact that your 'get up and go' has got up and gone. Yet even recognising that you are not where you should be is a good thing. The next step is to simply come before God, admit your situation, and ask for His help. '... I will make thee a new sharp threshing instrument having teeth ...' (Is 41:15) God created us to live fruitful and productive lives. As William A Ward has noted, 'God wants us to be victors, not victims; to grow, not grovel; to soar, not sink; to overcome, not be overwhelmed.' Where we may have lost the fire and vigour, He yearns to reinvigorate us, and will do just that, if we will but come and ask. 'Ask, and it shall be given you.' (Mt 7:7) And, if you have never, as yet, looked in faith to Christ for forgiveness and salvation, won't you similarly come today and ask? 'For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.' (Rom 10:13)