

Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland

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Saturday 3 October 2020

Isaiah 43:1-13

Reflection

You don't need me to tell you that we're living with considerable uncertainty - that much is certain. See what I did there?!

Now, that was the case anyway. From the Church's point of view, we committed ourselves at GA19 to step into something new. We had an idea of general direction but little sense of detail - therefore, uncertainty. Like booking a weekend in London but not knowing how you're going to get there.

Some of us thrive in such times, others of us struggle.

But that hardly registers a murmur on the Richter scale when compared to the uncertainty relating to the very life of our planet, given the escalating climate crisis, or might I say "catastrophe" unfolding around us.

And always, the poorest suffer disproportionately.

You want to talk uncertainty. It's right there and looming larger by the day.

And then throw COVID-19 into the mix and, well, there's every reason for anxiety amid that level of uncertainty.

Uncertainty around lockdown restrictions, jobs, money, health, mental wellbeing, education, life itself.

So there is a big picture, and as part of that, there's the situation of the Church.

So what do we do in the face of such uncertainty? I say this: we hold our nerve and we carry on.

Holding our nerve isn't always easy. Those highland warriors gathered around Mel Gibson in Braveheart... you can see them quivering as the English cavalry bears down on them. They're desperate to raise their pikes to defend themselves. But Wallace insists, 'Hold, hold, hold...'

And, of course, Kipling meant the same thing when writing, "If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs..."

And I loved Tom Hanks in July's movie premiere 'Greyhound,' in which Hanks plays navy commander Ernest Krause, charged with leading an Allied convoy across the Atlantic in the face of the ever-present threat of attack from the hidden enemy, the German U-boats. And in the heat of battle, as the crew listens for sonar signals of approaching submarines, and ready to launch a barrage of depth-charges in response, the captain orders: 'Hold, hold, hold your nerve.'

Now in encouraging us to do so, to hold our nerve, I'm not leaning on any misplaced or false sense of security; I'm not pointing here or there, identifying this or that which would give us grounds for holding our nerve.

Why would we when we know well that "tower and temple fall to dust?" As the psalmist says, "Some trust in chariots and some in horses..."

But in distancing himself from that, he points us to the One in whom trust can rightly be founded. "We trust in the name of the Lord."

So the call is to the Church to hold its nerve in the face of temporal uncertainty and shifting sand because we have a rock-solid, firm foundation upon which to hold fast.

We have confidence because we have God, who affirms, "I will be with you - though the waters foam and the fires rage around you."

We have confidence to hold our nerve amid uncertainty because we trust in the one who says, "I will never leave you nor forsake you," - one of whom we can say, "The Lord is my helper; therefore I will not be afraid."

We stare down uncertainty because we are held by the one who, as we heard in yesterday evening's scripture, says, "I AM with you always, even to the end of the age." Note the tense: it's a "here and now" promise. "I am with you."

So we hold our nerve, confident in the One who will surely hold us.

We hold our nerve and we carry on. Doing what?

What we're called to do!

Preachers? Preach! There is good news; it needs preaching! Arm yourselves with the whole armour of God as you bring a word of comfort to those who are troubled and trouble to those who are unduly comfortable. With the Apostle, "be confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear."

Pastors? Pastor! Love people, care for people. Be gentle and kind. Listen intently. Judge not. Be a pastor to those entrusted to your care and to those who would consider themselves unworthy of your attention, let alone God's amazing grace.

Prophets? Prophecy! Call for orphans and widows to be cared for in their distress - including those who paid all they had to wash up on our beaches in inflatable dinghies. Call for holiness. Rail against inequality and injustice and the politics of division and hatred of "the other."

People? Pray without ceasing. Love God. Love your neighbour as yourself. Love your enemy. And did I mention? Pray without ceasing.

And that's how we carry on. You see we're not stuck, are we?! There's plenty to get on with, even in these circumstances - for by God's strength we need never settle for being "under the circumstances," as if rendered redundant by what we face.

We hold our nerve and we carry on. We commit ourselves to new days and new ways even while giving ourselves to "the long obedience in the same direction" that Nietzsche spoke of.

We hold our nerve not because we believe that we have what it takes but because we believe in One who takes what we have - and uses it for the establishing of His Kingdom.

We carry on because we are in for the long run and because we believe that "this too shall pass."

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, AMEN.

