

1 Peter 4:7-9

You don't see so many of them now but I well remember a few of the rugged individuals who walked up and down the main shopping streets in the centre of Belfast. Barely a Saturday went by when you didn't see them. They were out there in all weathers. These were men from the old school and, I can tell you, they were characters in their own right. If you passed one, you certainly wouldn't get passed the second one without being accosted and offered a piece of paper which turned out to be a gospel tract. Brave souls, they certainly were! It wasn't the fact that they were giving out gospel leaflets that made them different; that was fine, I could cope with that; at the same time many of them were wearing what we called a sandwich-board. And, more often than not, the text which appeared in bold black capitals on one side of the board is the one that we are looking at in our study today. It's what we read in 1 Peter 4:7 where Peter urges us to realise that 'the end of all things is near'. The challenge of such an apocalyptic statement is found in Peter's next comment when he writes: 'Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray.' Basically, Peter is reminding his readers that life, as they know it, will one day come to an end. This world will not last for ever, it won't go on and on and on, ad infinitum. It is so tempting to think that life, and the big world all around us, will carry on as it always has done. I can assure you, if we are living our lives with that attitude then we have a huge problem with our mindset. That's the syndrome of the man in the street, that's the orbit he lives in, he lives today as if there was no tomorrow the day after! But Peter kicks that argument into touch, he does it here and he does it even more in his second epistle in chapter 3. The fact is, Peter is emphasising one of his major themes, the climax of the ages is imminent because Jesus is coming a second time. Peter had seen the Lord Jesus ascend from the Mount of Olives until he vanished in a cloud. He heard the angels repeat the promise of the Lord from John 14 that he would come again. This

was the constant hope of the early church, it was the expectation of believers who were suffering in the trenches of persecution and, between then and now, a lot of water has gone under the bridge. So much has happened on a massive scale in our global village that the signs of the times all indicate that it can't be very much longer before Jesus breaks through the clouds for his own redeemed people. It seems to me, if his return was near then, how much closer it is today! The nagging question in the front of my mind is: how near is near? I firmly believe, we are well past the eleventh hour and it's almost midnight; actually, in the words of one sharp-eyed prophetic pundit, 'it has never been so late before!' You see, it goes back to what I said at the top of today's study, many of our contemporaries who aspire after a cringe-free society expect to see that warning crudely lettered on a sandwich-board carried by a lonely figure with long hair and dirty sandals. As someone has said with more than a hint of perception: 'The figure appears often enough in cartoons and advertising, but rarely these days do you find him on city centre streets. Yet, the smug assumption that only a crazy gone-from-his-senses individual would prophesy the end, has begun to ring hollow in our nuclear age.' In such a cynical climate, it has to be said, how radically different is the Christian's anticipation of the end from the dark and ominous foreboding that has nothing more than nuclear wipe-out and annihilation in its sights. Such a terrifying spectre of the end times scenario leaves the keen Christian, not holding on like grim death with sweaty palms and clenched teeth; no, no! it leaves him sitting calmly on the edge of his seat with a high level of excitement bubbling in his heart. The bottom line is, the believer looks for the Lord who will bring judgment, justice and the wonder of a bright new world; Peter goes to town on that thought when he develops it later on in his second epistle. Obviously, if we passionately and fervently believe in the soon return of Christ, then it ought to have a positive influence on our lifestyle. According to the apostle, we are to be 'clear minded'. This experience of a clear head describes the practical wisdom that

comes from a personal knowledge of the Lord. In Greek use the term was contrasted with mania; for example, the demonised man healed by Jesus was found seated, clothed and 'in his right mind'. That's the thought encapsulated here. In the context of what Peter is saying, an unhealthy preoccupation with the second advent of Christ, particularly by those who have set a date for it as if they were on the planning committee for the event, has often led to hysteria rather than sober reflective wisdom. Someone has called it 'an eschatological frenzy' and, quite frankly, that's the last thing we need in these days of hyper-tension. Allied to a clear mind is the twin virtue of being 'self-controlled'. This word can be literally translated: be sober! Now, I hasten to add, that has nothing to do with intoxication in the sense of someone having had one glass too many for the road, that's definitely not the thought here. I think it's interesting to note that this is the second time Peter has exhorted his Asian readers in this manner, the first time was away back in 1:13 and, if you fast forward to 5:8, you'll notice he does it a third time. That suggests, this is a matter of mega-importance. It is the attitude of mind that is the opposite of a drunken stupor or starry-eyed delusion. It means a watchful waiting for the Lord's return, it does not infer that you quit your job right away, put on a white robe, and sit on some rooftop waiting for Jesus to come back; it's all about realistic living in the third millennium. When you draw the strings and put both concepts together, it's all about the people of God remaining cool, calm and collected even when all is crashing around their feet! It's a balanced outlook on life, there's no need to panic, there's no need to live on pills because you are over anxious about the future; the plain fact is, God is in control and he knows precisely what he is doing; so, says Peter, we have nothing to fear, there's no need for us to be apprehensive in the wrong sense! The simple logic of Peter's twin approach to the second coming is unbelievable, it not only keeps us sane, it drives us to prayer! Isn't that tremendous, it sends us to our knees! One Bible commentator offers this rich insight on intimacy with the Almighty when he

writes: 'Peter does not think of prayer as an effort to induce ecstasy, but as sober, direct, profoundly thoughtful communication with the Lord.' And, you know, he's right, for Peter's entire epistle points us to the depth and glory of our fellowship with Christ. The ageing apostle who wears his heart on his sleeve doesn't advocate prayer as a cold, detached, rational kind of exercise. That's not true to form so far as Peter is concerned, he sees these moments with majesty as a fervent heart that is 'on the boil' in its pursuit of God. Peter's memory takes him right back to the garden of Gethsemane, he knew of Christ's agony under the gnarled olive trees; that's what true prayer is, it is fervent love, it is agonising intercession. You see, at one and the same time, as Edmund Clowney suggests, prayer tastes the agony of struggle or the delight of communion with God. And, even from that incident alone, the lesson is an unforgettable one: prayer demands alertness. Peter and his companions failed miserably at that point, sleep got the better of them! He dozed off when Jesus had charged him to watch and pray. So, the link of prayer to a clear mind and a sober outlook is more than just a coincidence, one is the natural outworking of the other! It is God's agenda for his people as they wait for the return of the coming King. As Chuck Swindoll says: 'We don't dream our way into eternity. We pray and watch. In fact,' he concludes, 'there is nothing quite like prayer to sharpen our awareness, to keep us alert, to make us more discerning, and yet to remind us who has the controls.'

The next verse, verse 8, lifts us to a higher level when Peter exhorts us to: 'Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers a multitude of sins.' The opening couple of words in this injunction are packed full with meaning. Peter says, I want you to do all of these things I have been telling you about, but more than anything else, I want you to really love one another. The word translated 'deeply' can also mean 'constant'. 'Keep love constant' would be a good translation. It doesn't matter which turn of phrase you prefer to use, the word describes something that is stretched or extended.

The energy expended, the 'don't distract me' focus, the high level of concentration, the tension etched on the face of the participant, these are all images which are conjured up in the mind. It pictures a sprinter or a race horse stretching for the finishing line. It's pulling out all the stops, it's straining and lunging yourself forward like an athlete to reach the tape at the end of a race, it's stretching high enough like a pole vault champion to clear the bar, it's pushing yourself beyond the limit, it's going further than you have ever gone before, it's doing what you never imagined was possible even in your wildest dreams! In picture language, that's what it is to love deeply. It's a no strings attached commitment to each other in the family of God. It's a love that keeps on loving and, it doesn't matter what happens, it will continue to show love to the other person. He says, there is no point in getting uptight and upset because some folk don't respond the way we hoped they would, there is nothing achieved if we keep a list of rights and wrongs about other people; there's no point in us holding a grudge or walking around with a big chip on our shoulder or even harbouring a resentful attitude toward a fellow believer, it is so much better to love them! If there was ever a time when we needed to stay close in the family of God, it is today. Don't play into the hands of the enemy! This is the moment for the Lord's people to stick together! For, in the words of a wiser Peter which he borrowed from the wisdom of Proverbs 10:12, 'love covers over all wrongs'. It is our solemn responsibility to forgive one another in the same way that Christ has forgiven us. That's the wavelength Paul was on when he said as much in Ephesians 4:32. And there's no limit to how often we are to do it. As someone has said: 'Love does not keep score, but grants forgiveness freely to every brother or sister who seeks it.' Our love cannot, of course, pay the price of sin. Jesus alone can do that! It is exclusive to him. But our love can imitate the mercy of God, our love can forgive, because it is the love of God that flows through us to the other person. This is the bedrock of our Christian experience and, when you read between the lines of the fast-moving narrative in the Acts

of the Apostles, it is clear that there is no more compelling testimony to a mixed-up world than the love and unity that Christians exhibit toward each other; such a witness is riveting and it makes people sit up and take notice! It is equally true to say that nothing is more disturbing or disruptive to the unity of the body of Christ than when Christians are guilty of in-fighting. When we prefer to throw a verbal punch rather than offer a hand of fellowship and friendship, it is a sleight on the name of Jesus and it is an awful smear on the witness of the local church. You find both camps mentioned in the word of God and that simply underlines the tremendous need for us to love each other even when we don't necessarily like one another! You will know as well as I do, some people are so easy to love that you just naturally fall into their open all embracing arms. But other folk are so hard to love, you have to work overtime at it and, even then, it's hard work! There is something about them that is abrasive and irritating, you can't get close to them, they want to keep you at a safe distance and even more than an arm's length away. Such folk are the opposite of magnets, they don't attract, they repel. Yet, even they need our love, perhaps more so than the others. I have no doubts in my mind that it is of the utmost importance that we dig deeply into the divine resources that God has given to us as we stretch every sinew in our body to love each other. I came across a quote the other day from Mahatma Gandhi, the Indian nationalist leader, he once said: 'I like your Christ but I don't like your Christians ... they are so unlike your Christ!' Those words really haunt me, they give me a chill, they send the shivers down my spine because I know only too well that his analysis is right; regrettably, his words are true! When I read a phrase like that, I can't help but ask myself the question, what is the Lord Jesus like? Well, he is surely someone whose character is stamped with the hallmark of love and forgiveness. And because, he is who he is, and because, he does what he does, that's why he wants us to be a people who do not hesitate to show authentic love to one another and we do that best when we genuinely forgive each

other! As someone has said: 'We are most like beasts when we kill, we are most like men when we judge, we are most like God when we forgive.' I can't put the words in your mouth, but I know who I want to be like! I want to be like Jesus! When I flick back a few pages in my Bible to John 13 I see what he did there and, let's remember, Peter was present on that auspicious occasion when Jesus took a towel and a basin of water to wash his disciples' filthy feet. You see, love for one another means that we will gladly and graciously serve each other. This is true love in action and it doesn't matter how menial or boringly repetitive the task may be, love is happy to roll up its sleeves and do it, it doesn't make a big fuss about it, it gets on with the job in hand. As someone has said: 'It is the love of God that brings us to our brother's feet; it is the grace of God that fills our basin for service!' One of the most practical ways we can serve is to put into practice the words of Peter in verse 9 when he says: 'Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.' The emphasis here is on a vital and valued ministry we can share with others, it's an open heart which leads to an open home; it's exactly the same phrase which Peter uses in verses 8 and 10, and it doesn't refer just to those who are loveable or friendly or fun to be with. It includes every member of the global family of God, it's an all inclusive term and that inevitably means those with whom we wouldn't normally choose to socialise, it's the people who turn us off, the ones with whom we don't naturally click. The plain fact is, it doesn't matter who they are, if they need a bed and a meal, we have a responsibility to offer it to them, whether they accept or not is up to them. In that sense, the ball is squarely in their court! You see, the word for hospitality is literally 'the love of strangers' or 'the love of foreigners'. As Stuart Briscoe points out, 'the word xenophobia, the fear of strangers, has found a place in our vocabulary, but philoxenia, the love of strangers, needs to appear in Christian terminology.' Peter tacks a little phrase on to the end of verse 9 which is crucial when it comes to showing hospitality. We are to extend it without complaint. I wonder, does that touch a raw

nerve in your heart? What do we complain most about when it comes to hospitality? About the time and trouble it takes, about the expense incurred, about the mess that is sometimes made, about the cleaning up after the guest has come and gone, about the interruption of privacy? I don't know what your response is, but what I do know is this: hospitality is never a problem when our priorities are in place, it is never an issue when love opens the door. I know in my own ministry I am enormously grateful to many dear friends who have looked after me wonderfully well all over the world. Such dear folk have been a tremendous blessing to me. You see, back in the early church, hospitality was incredibly important; the people didn't meet each week in a multi-purpose fully equipped sanctuary, they met in homes because that was all they had. Not only that, travelling preachers didn't book into the local five star Hilton. They had a straightforward choice between staying in a Christian home or spending the night in a flea-ridden den of iniquity. If the truth be told, hospitality was the stuff of which the early church was made!