

Sunday 25 August 2024 – Putting on the Armour... Jonathan Williamson

Jonathan Williamson puts the military metaphors in St Paul's Letter to the Ephesians in the context of our Christian discipleship.

Readings:

Ephesians 6.10-20; John 6.56-69

Sermon: 'Putting on the Armour....'- Jonathan Williamson

Our two readings today are quite powerful in demonstrating the challenges faced as a Christian disciple. One is about the importance of being strong in witnessing to our faith, and the other states quite openly that some may find it so hard to accept Christ's teaching and mission that they will give up. Whilst both readings complement each other, the language used in each is quite different. The first passage from Ephesians uses quite a lot of references to armour and war, and the gospel continues last week's core focus of the eucharist in referring to Jesus' body and blood.

When I used to attend another church in this diocese, which was of a different tradition – I would say it was charismatic evangelical – it was quite common for sermons, and words of knowledge (which were aplenty) to feature triumphalist or metaphorical language on the subject of spiritual warfare. At that time in my Christian journey, such language and sentiment – quite frankly – used to give me the heebie geebies. I found it extraordinarily uncomfortable and difficult to align a continual message of keeping vigilant and ever alert to the devil and his wiles, with my wish to be within an environment of welcome, assurance and grace.

Since I am well into my third decade of what is a liberal tradition – however each of us may understand that term – I actually find that I am less perplexed or discomfited by metaphorical language than I used to be, and having learned from many St Mark's CRC seminars about how Christian language can be distorted, I can read passages referring to warfare and the like through different eyes. In fact, if I may be permitted a little St Mark's heresy, I sometimes wish we still sang about Christian *soldiers* marching onwards, rather than pilgrims, but that is another sermon for another time.

Hence, in looking at the passage from Ephesians, I can understand that some may not like the imagery contained therein. For many, language associated with warfare is off-putting and does not sit easily with a pacifist philosophy many have signed up to. Moreover, many of the first disciples did not like the message that Jesus was giving in the gospel – such that many did fall away. However, if I can acknowledge my own initial reservations about difficult language, and wrestle with the texts, I believe I can allow God to break through. And so, this passage from Ephesians is extremely rich in encouragement when we examine it closely.

Now, in reading the passage we are encouraged to stand up against the rulers, the authorities, and the cosmic powers. We are encouraged to speak the truth.

Cath, Ruth and I have recently returned from a fortnight in Dorset, and we stayed near the beach where the ITV drama 'Broadchurch' was filmed. If you don't know the show, it concerns a murder enquiry after a young boy's body is found on the seashore. We watched the DVD whilst on holiday to do a bit of location spotting – but we noticed to our horror that during the funeral for the boy, the vicar uses the occasion to castigate the entire village for their behaviour in failing to come together as a community – and Cath and I turned to each other and simultaneously said "said no vicar, ever, at a funeral". I mention this because I believe the pulpit is for encouragement rather than for criticism. Were I glibly to take on Paul's sentiment I could stand here and criticise past and present governments, media companies, multinationals,

local authorities and institutions, and all this would do would be to reveal my own prejudices and alienate many listeners. Hardly any encouragement or good news.

So, what do I take from the Paul's message? Well, essentially, we are told that we should face our enemies with truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation and the spirit. These are each associated with an aspect of armour – a belt, a breastplate, shoes, a shield, a helmet, and a sword. In reading this a few times I am reminded of St Patrick's Breastplate – a prayer of protection from my patron saint. It is a beautiful and rich prayer, and it focuses on Christ being all around us – a full, *protective*, enveloping presence. Of the six items referred to in Paul's armour, 5 of them are defensive or protective – belt, breastplate, shoes, shield, helmet. I don't see this as a waging war message, but as one of encouragement that we are protected in our discipleship. Our – what to us may seem small – attempts at living as disciples – seeking God, looking after our neighbours, seeking peace in the world, not giving up, living lives of grace, and allowing the Holy Spirit to guide us – these are putting on the full armour. We do not have to imagine ourselves striding out in formation, with fixed bayonets.

I also think that this full armour need not necessarily refer to individuals but to the church. Some of us are stronger in some areas than others, and we all have our weaknesses. But as a church community we can become strong. Where one is weak another will be strong.

I do think that Paul's final point is essential – which is to pray in the Spirit at all times. We will all have our own understanding of prayer, and will have different models of what works for us. I have just been reading about Henri Nouwen's model of prayer, and he found that he could not pray anywhere but only in certain places. He found it most easy to pray in places where others had prayed over many centuries. You will have ways, models, times, and paces for prayer. Whatever works for us is fine.

And I think it is *essential* because of what Paul refers to in the passage – truth. Fasten the belt of truth around your waist. I am often a little wary of the phrase 'speaking truth to power' as it assumes the speaker has the monopoly on truth. On the other hand, if we have no truth then we have no gospel. So I find it encouraging that Paul notes how important it is to spend time in prayer so that we do get closer to God and can get a little closer to seeing God's presence in this world. And we can continue to listen for God's truth for us and our community.

Amen.

© Jonathan Williamson (2024)