

*Finally ...*

Finally ... the eighth sermon on Ephesians and it is only 6 chapters as we come to the end of our almost continuous reading of this New Testament letter from a former pastor to the place where he spent the most time in his ministry – apart from prison.

Finally ... having been elected by God before the creation of the world, made alive because of Christ and living by faith because it is by God's grace we're saved, we are aware that as disciples of Jesus in an old dying world, nothing is the same because we are new creations in Christ. For the first Christians, probably the most revolutionary and even scandalous change in how one lived was in relation to the former Jew – Gentile divide for Jesus himself is their peace, who has made them both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility (Ephesians 2:14 ESV). And each generation of disciples can say that about any social categories found in the world – tribes, colour, nationalities, status in the military, wealth categories, educational differentiation, gender – that when the other is also 'in Christ', when we discover the other to also have Christ dwelling in their hearts through faith, then together we comprehend – or just get a sense of – the love of Christ and the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:17-19).

Finally ... all this religious talk about unity in Christ – one Lord, one faith, one baptism – where Jesus is the Word who speaks in love as his servants speak in his name and he gives new life to his people which is not just for contemplation and meditation only but is for living, living out. No longer walk in darkness as the Gentiles do – put off your old self – put on the new self created in the likeness of God – thieves, don't steal but work – those with mouths, no filth and hurt coming out anymore but speak the truth in love – if you're angry, don't sin – don't let sexuality, sensuality, pleasure have its way with you because both you and anyone you're involved with are being used – instead as light in the Lord, make the best use of the time, through worship and service of one another and paradoxically find the love and joy and meaning we crave in this world through mutual submission.

Finally ... yes, it's practical and radical and goes against the ways of society with its emphasis on power and domination but men love one woman, more than that, sacrifice for one woman – and in Roman society as still today the shock of 'one?!' is still very loud – and women, be in submission to your own man – and together craft a marriage to last, unique to yourselves until separated by death itself. Now that's a new vision of living under Christ! And Paul also had words for children and parents, slaves and masters which recognise their place in society but now not as the world expects for the call for Christians remains to serve where you are in your relationships, as to the Lord.

And now we come to finally where we're sitting in the pew today or even back then the first time the letter was read out to the congregation and what do we find – or what can we imagine – that everyone is living this discipleship perfectly? That the new life in Christ is having such an effect on the world that people are breaking down the doors eager to hear more? Rather I can imagine Jews and Gentiles trying to overcome generations of past programming, as it were, with emotions and behaviours flaring up like geysers and creating friction and hurt. I can imagine people who have lived adulterously, idolatrously, covetously now finding it hard, at times, to not scurry back to the dark – and maybe a few have had a tough week. I can imagine some women and men have just put their arguing on hold when they arrived at the church door – both of them tired with other and wondering what the future holds for them. Same with children and slaves who may have tough parents and masters to be sure but maybe at the moment they're also just wanting to rebel and have life on their terms. Sorry, I started with the first century congregations but maybe you might recognise twenty-first century ones. It is definitely not uncommon for people to come to church frazzled and tired and despondent about their own sins or their relationships; with problems that don't seem to be eased but if anything just increases; with grief and maybe bitterness that others seem to have it 'easy' with life when they are weighed down; or with no real gripe with life except that some people in the congregation just annoy

them and quite frankly ‘I know I should love them but I hope heaven is a big place’, and so Paul says ‘for the rest (of your life or your time)’ or ‘from now on’ or as English translations say ‘Finally ...’.

*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak. (Ephesians 6:10-20 ESV)*

For Paul the people around us – no matter what they may be doing – are not our enemies and even when they are harmful and evil toward us, we know how Jesus wants us to behave toward our enemies – but we are to be aware that our ‘fight’, as it were, is with the devil and his schemes because those in Christ have left the devil’s domain and he is not happy about it and seeks to devour us again. Paul describes our opponents variously as rulers, authorities, powers that have a cosmic scope though one can’t see the extent because it is this present darkness that the world is in. The spiritual forces of evil in the heavenlies was described according to John as a beast rising out of the sea and a beast rising out of the earth (Revelation 13) whereby we understand that evil operates in all our structures and organisations seeking to knock us down for the count, in torment and darkness. Strictly these are the death throes of the defeated dragon which uses shame and anger to isolate Christians from the body of Christ, from the unity in Christ and with each other and does what is possible to separate us from Christ and that means from fellow disciples.

And so Paul reminds Christians that God himself equips us with his armour so that we may stand – the best position to receive the attack, the position from which is best able and ready to defend, and from which to fight. We’ve seen enough pictures of ancient Roman soldiers to understand the armour – given to us by God – his equipping of us for this life – the belt of truth marking our military insignia and practically getting the clothing ready for action – the breastplate of righteousness which, of course, is Christ’s not ours – the good shoes to move in and the paradox (akin to the heavenly armies singing of God’s glory and peace on earth – they’re out of job! – at Christ’s birth) that Christians fight best by declaring God’s peace with the people who hate him – the shield of faith by which the attacks of doubt, despair, and whatever cuts away at our belief in God’s goodness and love are extinguished – and then the sword of the Spirit, God’s Word who is Jesus who can defend himself because he is the strong man and who confronts people with himself, his claims, so that people see their sinfulness and his compassion. It is not hard for us to imagine prisoner Paul having had lots of opportunity to study the Roman soldier’s armour and thus giving us a picture of the hidden spiritual realities of ourselves and this world.

So how do you feel? Ready to go and fight? Ready to go up to the atheist at work and stick to him with some punchy one-liner? Committed to not back down when you see sin? Ready to roar a battle cry for Jesus? Have you got yourself all armoured up ready for another week in the world?

I don’t know how first century Christians visualised this but I suspect that when we do today – when we give the colouring page in Sunday School about this text – there is only one soldier on the page, only one in our mind. Today we think very much in terms of I, me, my – when I would suggest that one of the messages through Ephesians is that we are always ‘we’ – in relationships, in groups – and a key message of Ephesians is that when it comes to the number 1, when it is in Christ, we are all one. So the picture in your mind or on the page of you armoured up, so to speak, should not be alone

because an army of one isn't going to last long – armies especially train and are organised that everyone has their place and function – and so in this spiritual battle, individuals should not be by themselves. Most of the armour we could probably put on ourselves but it is always helpful, quicker, and easier, when we are helped into our armour, and when we act in coordination and with knowledge and solidarity, we are strengthened for the battle. Christian families together, Bible Study groups together, congregations together, districts and synods together, denominations finding ways of being together – yes, dialogue should be happening – because the truth already exists that there is only one, holy, Christian / catholic, and apostolic Church and we are not to live contrary to this truth.

And now come two paradoxes with this armour language and these 'fighting words' that what we are called to do first and foremost is 'stand and pray'. Jesus said 'watch and pray' – same thing really. Those in armour pray – be alert with all perseverance – intercessory prayer is tough work to do regularly but the saints need it and you need it – and Paul wasn't fussy about asking for it – that he might have the right words that would bring the Gospel to those who heard him. Prayer however seems so inactive, often futile, the last resort, and not a good use of armour when in truth it is the first task before all else in this world for Jesus has made his people 'a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth' (Revelation 5:10 ESV) which is through prayer by which we share in Jesus' work here on earth (John 14:12-14). Thus especially Jews pray for Gentiles and Gentiles for Jews, pastors for congregations and congregations for pastors, congregations for congregations and for synods and synods for congregations, men for their women and women for their own men, parents for children and children for parents, slaves for masters and masters for slaves – and the entire Body of Christ for the world. This is not haphazard for emergencies only but is disciplined and maybe even coordinated and definitely regular.

And the second paradox is that we can seem to ourselves and we will definitely look to the world as weak, ineffectual, foolish. Paul, after all, was a prisoner though he was an ambassador of the King of kings and Lord of lords and that is how the world and the powers and authorities will act to do whatever it can to knock us down. But just as the Lamb on the throne was slain but was still standing, just as the white robed martyrs stand before the throne and the Lamb, so no matter what we seem to ourselves or to the world, those in Christ stand – under the cross and they want to go nowhere else. For it is only at the cross of Jesus that the armour is made ready for us and baptism is where it is personally given to us and at Holy Communion we are dressed and cleaned up and repaired – none of this happens apart from a group – together – members of the Body helping and supporting each other as we watch each other and pray – the beginning of serving one another – and then together we go out and face the world.