

Ephesians 6:10-20

Putting on the armour of God

When I was a parish priest, looking after 4 schools, I had a children's dressing up outfit for a Roman soldier. At the end of the school year assemblies, I would read this passage from Ephesians and ask for a willing volunteer to put on each part of the armour. After a brief explanation, I would finish with an invitation to each Year 6 leaver to put on this spiritual armour every morning as they went out onto the next part of their journey in life. I hope the message served them well! But let's see what it means for us.

This call to put on the armour of God seems very timely this week with all the atrocities going on around the world. But as Christians, we are called to be peace-makers, not warriors and soldiers, ready to go into battle, so how does this passage sit with us?

First of all, we need to consider the context of this reading. Paul wrote this letter to the new, emerging church in Ephesus. This was a thriving, commercial, multi-cultural city, where the goddess Artemis was the dominant deity (along with the Roman Emperor). The new converts would have been heavily influenced by the Greco-Roman mythology. The Christians were a religious minority where their religion was illegal – they faced harassment, discrimination and probably persecution. Paul warned them that they needed to be aware of the forces of sin, evil and death around them; that they must shed their former pagan beliefs and lifestyles, that they must fight a battle against these spiritual forces in order to be transformed into the likeness of Christ, to be holy and righteous. Life would have been hard.

It's hard to go against the flow, isn't it - to refuse to conform to the norms of society, not to blend in with conventional morality, to stand up for our own convictions against the popular culture. It's hard to live our Christian life in a hostile environment. Our spiritual battles might not be the same as they were for the early Ephesian church but they are nonetheless significant. Think about those things that oppose God's will, that distort the truth, that incite hatred today; those things that promote violence and discrimination and target the vulnerable: greed, addiction, racism, misogyny, religious intolerance, political corruption – the list could go on and on. These ideologies are the spiritual forces of darkness and evil, whose goal is to undermine our faith and turn us from Christ and back to sin. These are the principles, behaviours and doctrines that we see operating against God's values of love, justice and peace. Our battles are not against individuals, communities or countries. But against those dogmas, those wrong attitudes, those things that replace God in our lives, that left unchecked, will lead to physical war, violence, injustice and oppression.

We know that the struggle against spiritual powers will test our resolve time after time. But Paul tells us that we should be strong in the Lord and put on God's whole armour. We cannot and should not do this on our own – it's not an individual battle. Paul is talking about our identity as the body of Christ, our common faith, united in our church community. This may require humility. It may mean facing ridicule or being unpopular. We may have to change our outlook and opinions, make ourselves vulnerable, willing to listen to others as we work towards a shared goal, not compromising our principles, in order to stand firm against evil, to be grounded in our shared faith.

Putting on the whole armour of God prepares us for the struggles, the challenges, the battles. It prepares us to engage with those issues and situations that really matter. It helps us survive in a secular society. Standing firm gives us a purpose and meaning. Putting on the whole armour of

God can renew our hope, help us reassess our situation, give us strength to be true to our convictions, to grow and deepen our sense of commitment in community.

So what is this whole armour of God? What are the spiritual weapons we have available to the Christian church, that equip us to be counter-cultural in the real world? The resources we have, Paul tells us, are truth, righteousness (that's being in a right relationship with God and with others), peace, faith, salvation, the Holy Spirit and God's word. And we can find these spiritual resources through prayer, among our fellow Christians. We may find them in expressions of music or art, in the wonders of nature, in acts of boldness or in the compassion and courage of the community of the faithful. It's only when we have these resources – this armour - that we are alert and ready to stand and fight evil, that we are protected and that we can boldly proclaim the gospel of peace and love. And to quote the words in our first reading – God speaking to Joshua – I know, it's out of context – but still worth hearing: "Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

And this is the prayer that I used at the end of the school year assemblies: the Armour of God Prayer

In the power of the Spirit and in union with Christ, let us pray to God:

As I put on the belt of truth around my waist, help me listen to and act upon your truth alone, and not be deceived by the devil's lies in the world around me.

As I put on the breastplate of righteousness, help me to fight against injustice in the world and to treat everyone fairly - to live my life in a way that honours you.

As I put on the shoes of the gospel of peace, help me be ready to share your gospel of peace with others and be willing to go wherever you ask, knowing that you will be there to lead me.

As I pick up the shield of faith, help me to trust that you are protecting me, that you are good, that you are faithful and that you are all powerful.

As I place the helmet of salvation on my head, thank you that Jesus died on the cross for me and that nothing can separate me from your love and the promise of eternal life with you.

As I take up the sword of the Spirit, help me to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit, bringing the word and wisdom of God to me.

Lord, I ask for your armour of protection to be around me and all for whom I pray, now and forever. In Jesus' name, Amen

And a prayer for the people of Iran and their neighbours. Ever loving God who hears us in our anguish and distress and who longs for us to be free, we pray for the people of Iran and the wider Middle East. At this time of fear and uncertainty, be near to those who are anxious, bring comfort to all who are suffering, guide those with the power to make decisions and lead them in the ways of wisdom, compassion and moderation, that people of good will, will seek harmony and reconciliation. Join us with our Christian brothers and sisters in all places in praying for peace and justice, through him who is the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen

And we say together: the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and forever. Amen.