

## Sermon - Ephesians 6.10-24

- Today we look at the final part of the letter to the Ephesians, as I bring this sermon series to an end.
- Previously, Paul had encouraged the Gentile Christians to watch out for sliding back into old habits, from before their conversion to following the Way of Christ.
- And, in last week's passage, he encouraged them in their domestic responsibilities, in the context of the status quo of their society at that time.
- Today he addresses their relationship with the wider community, and once again he does this in reference to the overarching theme of this letter - their faith relationship with God.
- A summary of today's passage would look like this:
  - a. Protect yourself with the armour God provides;
  - b. keep praying;
  - c. I'm sending you Tychicus to encourage you;
  - d. peace, love, and grace be with you.

### Forces of evil in the heavenly places

- My primary focus is on the the first part, and I'm going to start with verses 11 and 12:

*Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*
- Some of the phrases here are not ones that we might be comfortable with using in our speech today, phrases such as *wiles of the devil*, *cosmic powers of this present darkness*, and *spiritual forces of evil*.
- However, just because we might be uncomfortable with this terminology, it does not mean that evil is not made manifest in this day and age.
- Whenever anyone acts deceitfully, or is motivated by malice, or is intentionally destructive towards others - then this is indeed the work of the devil, the effect of dark powers, and the influence of evil forces.
- One of the key aspects that Paul identifies is not only that forces of evil exist, but also that they can do so in the heavenly places.
- Sadly we have finally come to recognise this as the decades-long sexual abuse of children in the Church has been exposed.
- Alongside that has been the additional deceit of those entrusted with authority in the church too often protecting the abusers and maligning the victims.
- One of the devastating aspects for many people of faith is trying to cope with the notion that this evil has taken root in the very organisation that is supposed to be a bulwark against evil.
- It is such a betrayal of the fundamentals of our faith, that many have walked away from either the Church or even from their faith, as a consequence.
- And yet today's Gospel passage highlights how the church community has been vulnerable to this deception right from the very beginning:

*Simon Peter said, '... You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.' Jesus answered them, 'Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil.' He was speaking of Judas son of Simon Iscariot, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray him. (John 6.68-71)*
- It is also why earlier in Ephesians, 5.21, Paul encourages the Church community to *Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ*, so as to enable us to be alert to evil manifesting itself within the Church, even in the presence of Christ.

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### Armour and weapon of defence

- Wherever we encounter evil, whether within the community of faith or outside of it, Paul exhorts us to *be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power, [and to] put on the whole armour of God ... so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. (Ephesians 6.10-11,13)*
- The interesting point to note here is that the armour is to help us to withstand evil, and to stand firm.
- This is not armour to enable us to attack, but rather to provide a defence against the effect and influence of evil.
- You might want to object to this notion, and point out that there is a sword included:  
*Take ... the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. (Ephesians 6.17)*
- Sometimes passionate Christians weaponise Scripture and use it to attack others - to be destructive towards other people.
- They think they're attacking sin in order to save the sinner, but that was never the way Jesus did it.
- Jesus saved sinners by forgiving their sins, and by letting them know that they were loved and accepted.
- Someone suggested that the sword of the Spirit is the only sword without a handle - that in order to wield it one must grasp it at the base of the sharp double-edged blade itself.
- This means that it needs to be wielded very cautiously, otherwise we end up doing terrible damage to our own selves.
- So it makes sense to understand this not as a weapon to attack, but rather as a weapon of defence.
- Indeed, in another letter, 2 Corinthians 6.7, Paul talks about *weapons of righteousness*, that is using our right-wise alignment with the loving purposes and holy desire of God as the means to engage with those we are in opposition with.

### Belt, breastplate, shoes, shield, and helmet

- Now let us consider the list of pieces of armour:  
*Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation. (Ephesians 6.14-17)*
- Belt, breastplate, shoes, shield, and helmet:
  - Firstly, the belt of truth reminds us that we are not to follow the deceptive ways of the world.
  - We keep hearing about fake news and conspiracy theories, and even good people who think they can justify using deceptive means to achieve good results: that the end justifies the means.
  - And yet Jesus said: *When the devil lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. (John 8.44)*
  - Whereas Jesus is *the way, and the truth, and the life (John 14.6)*
  - The belt of truth is not only to remind us to discern what is true and what is false in the world around us, but also to be able to discern what is true and what is false within ourselves.
  - Maybe if Judas had more consciously been wearing the belt of truth, he might have recognised within himself his own deceptiveness *before* he betrayed Jesus, instead of only afterwards.
- Secondly, the breastplate of righteousness is about protecting our vital organs, particularly our heart.
- Righteousness can be more easily understood as right-wiseness: ensuring that our hearts are rightly aligned with God's heart, that we are facing the light, that we are in the Way of Jesus.

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- When we regularly ask ourselves: am I responding in love, am I focused on what is light-bearing, am I acting in a way that is life-nurturing - then we are constantly nudging ourselves back into right alignment with God.
- This is what it means to be righteous, and to protect ourselves with righteousness.
  
- Thirdly, the shoes of readiness to proclaim God's shalom.
- I use the Hebrew word *shalom*, because it's more than just passive peace: it is about active well-being.
- And the shoes of readiness enable us to go the distance, for our feet to be protected as we walk the Way of Jesus for the rest of our pilgrimage of earth.
- Although in the fight against evil we need only stand while God's Spirit overcomes what is evil, we are also expected to walk to those - and with those - who are suffering the impact of evil in their lives, and proclaim the good news that God loves them, forgives them, accepts them, and wants them to experience his peace.
  
- Fourthly, the shield of faith is about relying on God.
- Our faith relationship with God is an active relationship whereby we are in conversation with God - both talking and listening - and where we rely on God, and God relies on us.
- Faith is about actively partnering with God, and responding to God's partnering with us.
- And the big rectangular Roman shield was one that a squadron of soldiers would each fit together to protect them from all sides.
- The community of faith can function the same way, in that through our active faith together we can help to protect the community as a whole.
- When we share our faith, and encourage and help each other to grow in faith, then the whole church community is protected.
  
- Fifthly, the helmet of salvation is a counterpart to the breastplate protecting the heart: the helmet protects the brain - the mind.
- God expects us to engage our heads as much as our hearts, both in remembering what God has done for us, and in being mindful - rather than mindless - in our actions and responses.
- Paul writes in his letter to the Romans:  
*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12.2)*
- Our minds need to be protected from evil, as much as our hearts.

### Pray, pray, pray

- The final aspect of staying strong in the Lord is spelled out in Paul's exhortation to pray, pray, pray.
- He writes:  
*Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints [that is, for our fellow sisters and brothers in Christ]. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel. (Ephesians 6.18-19)*
- Prayer ensures that God's armour is well maintained, and keeps us properly equipped with it - wearing and carrying it effectively.
- This is why so much of our liturgy consists of prayer: prayers of praise, of confession, of thanksgiving, and of supplication.

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- We need to be turning to God every day, listening and talking to him, and asking for his guidance and protection, for his blessing and shalom - both for ourselves and for others.
- And so as we conclude this sermon series covering the whole of the letter to the Ephesians, I will end with the final two verses for all of us:

*Peace be to the whole community, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who have an undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 6.23-24)*

Amen.