

Pentecost 13
26/8/2012

Mark the Evangelist

1 Kings 8:1, 6, 10-11, 22-30, 41-43

Psalm 84

Ephesians 6:10 - 20

John 6:56 – 71

Put on the whole armour of God to stand against the wiles of the devil (Eph 6:12)

Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil (Eph 6:12)

These words from the Epistle to the Ephesians are troubling to modern ears. Once popular Hymns like “Onward Christian Soldiers” are not found in our hymnbooks anymore because Christians no longer want to associate discipleship with militaristic imagery. And it is doubtful whether these days anyone but a literalist thinks about what *the wiles of the devil* might be. On the surface, texts like Ephesians 6:10-20 seem to have little to contribute to how modern Christians think. One of the gifts of the lectionary is that it challenges us to grapple with texts we might prefer to avoid.

The letter of Ephesians is one of several letters written by someone who knew Paul well enough to write in his theological style, which makes it easy for us to still think of this as Paul’s voice. The aim of Ephesians was to help communities founded by Paul to deal with changes that began to affect them after their leader’s imprisonment and death. The aim seems to be to help them go forward in the faith of their Baptism and to alert them to trickery and deviousness that might lead them to fall back into their old ways.

This letter presents us with a picture of society caught up in a cosmic struggle that has been won by Christ. The Baptised have already *clothed themselves with a new self* [Eph 4:24] and begun to live a new life that has its source and future *with Christ in the heavenly places* [Eph 1:20; 2:20]. But the community faces some kind of threat. And from the beginning of Chapter 4 to the commencement of our reading, Paul focussed on ethical exhortations intended to help his audience live according to the vision gifted to them in Christ.

But at Ephesians 6:10-20 Paul moves suddenly from ethics inspired by a heavenly vision to call on militaristic imagery. The verses sound like a call to arms and it may seem Paul has come down from heaven to deal with earthly realities. But he still sees the struggle of life as a spiritual combat. And like many religious and philosophical writers of his day, he utilises military metaphors to call people to stay strong in the spiritual struggle.

The theological tension that lies behind Ephesians 6:10-20 is a tension that exists between heaven and earth. While Christ has won the victory against evil and darkness, and the Baptised have begun to clothe themselves in a new life, they remain subject to remnant menacing powers. They are bearing the cost of living in between the now and the not yet.

If you have ever been involved in killing a snake, you know that even when its back is broken it goes on writhing and is as venomous as ever. The worst is over, but the danger is not yet passed, and you have to remain alert.

Ephesians would have us see that we live in the time of the Kingdom. Its presence has been announced and we have seen the first sign of the defeat of evil in the Cross and Resurrection of Christ. But fulfilment still lies ahead. The serpent still writhes and has the potential to poison life for us. The powers that rail against Christ are given to trickery they are capable of disrupting the progress of the Gospel and disturbing life. And, as the final verses from John show, there is no limit to where the darkness may work: Jesus is betrayed by one of his inner circle.

The Christian community continues to live in faith and hope, and work for the coming of the Kingdom. But in doing so we are called to stay strong in faith and alert to the forces against God – here referred to as the powers of darkness or the wiles of the devil. Ephesians names the powers as spiritual: they may be human, meta-human or some other form of spiritual power. The powers may appear as a plausible but twisted teacher who advocates a new version of the faith; or an organization that tempts us to take new and false path. The powers may even be a collection of good people aiming to do good, who have somehow lost the plot as far as the faith of the church is concerned. But what all these have in common is that they deeply affect the society in which believers live, and lead them away from peace, truth and unity.

This is the backdrop against which we may come to understand the call for Christians who have put on Christ as a garment, to put on the whole armour of God in order to resist these distracting and menacing forces at work in the world.

The sense of the now but the not yet that we have been talking about is clear in Paul's own writing. Writing from prison, he describes himself as *an ambassador in chains* [6:20]. The image is highly ironic, because by virtue of his office an ambassador he would be protected - immune from ending up in prison. If we wanted to solve the problem of Julian Assange we could make him Ambassador for Ecuador and he might be free to go where he wanted to. But this is not Paul's way. He hopes that his present situation of discomfort will provide him with new opportunities to boldly make known *the mystery of the gospel* [6:19]. Under pressure he is all the more alert to a new opportunity. Even a negative situation could have a productive result for those who keep their eye on the thing that really matters.

If we lived in Paul's time and were in prison as he was, the image of a Roman soldier in full battle dress would be easy to contemplate, even if the threats we were facing were not immediately human, but much harder to define. The imagery of the full armour of God may not be capable of rehabilitation, but if we don't look at it, we are likely to miss what it is intending to say.

The first point is that Paul uses this image to call his people to prepare for the future: to be like soldiers who are at the ready, who watch and wait. There is no sense Paul's soldier is called to provoke aggression.

The weapons are defensive in nature, rather than offensive. They are not weapons of mass destruction.

Then comes the armour, which is like a series of gifts. 6:14 *Stand, therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness.* Stand is an allusion to resurrection. And righteousness is God's gift to us in Christ. Righteousness protects the heart and the vital organs. The soldiers, and these days this includes women and men, are meant wrap themselves in the truth of the Gospel as protection against the onslaught of negative forces.

6:15 *As shoes ... put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the Gospel.* A Roman soldier wore cleated shoes so that in battle it was possible to stand his ground and not slip. In Ephesians the Gospel is understood as Peace, truth and unity. The call is to stand firm in these things and not to slip. Isaiah's words come to mind: "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace". It is God's gift of peace, with all the depth of meaning that it has, that helps the Christian community keep its grip on life in the world.

6:16 *Take the shield of faith... to quench the flaming arrows of the evil one.* In the context of Ephesians, the flaming arrows, which could ignite a community, were understood as the verbal attacks of troublemakers: unbelievers and betrayers, who sought to break in and break down the faith of the community. The chief resort is the shield of faith. It was this alone that could turn away or stall the inflaming arrows.

6:17 *Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit.* The interesting thing about these two is that the soldier would have been given these two items. They would have been handed to him. Salvation is a gift, and so is the Spirit. The soldiers in Ephesians defend the faith on the basis of gifts that yield them a strength not their own.

So it may be possible to see that these ancient ideas still have currency for a community under pressure. And we have been and are under pressure. We may reflect further on these images and think of where we need to be alert and ready to defend the faith and practice of the community, that we may be pleasing to God.

Finally Paul's soldier is called to: *Pray in the Spirit at all times* [6:18]. This is the watchfulness and perseverance we are called to in the season of Advent and again in Lent: the alertness that will enable us to be aware of the residual darkness, in others, and in ourselves that distracts us from being ready for what God is calling us to do.
