

Ephesians 6:10-20

Psalm 34

John 6:56-69

Principalities and powers

“...for our struggle is not against 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”
(*Ephesians 6.10*)

Paul’s talk of spiritual principalities and the powers strikes most today as quite alien. Even for many believers, it is embarrassing language, the residue of an earlier time we are keen to leave behind.

Yet, any embarrassment we might feel here about Paul’s language is in strange tension with what *doesn’t* embarrass faith – the very belief in *God*. There is a tension here because, recalling what we said last week about the God of Israel and Jesus Christ as one God among many, this God is a kind of principality or power. We find ourselves, then, in the strange situation that we can believe in God as a “spiritual” goodie, but not in Paul’s spiritual *baddies* – the principalities and powers. The spiritual realities Paul refers to in the first couple of verses of today’s reading are not something we now consider to be “real”, but *God* as spirit *is*.

And yet we know that there *is* real evil – at least in the “historical” world, if not in any sensible way in the “spiritual” world. This suggests that in much common religious belief, Good is fundamentally a “spiritual” thing insofar as it springs from God, but Evil is a secular or historical thing – something which springs from human activity and not from outside. Paul’s distinction between good and evil – between God and the “principalities and powers” – becomes for us a distinction between spirit and world.

This is much of the malaise of Christian faith today, for what has the spirit to do with the world? To throw away the principalities and powers as “spiritual” realities is to throw away any connection between God and the world, if God is “just” spirit.

Now, the point here is not that faith in God as spirit requires that we believe in evil spirits, as Paul seems to believe in them. Rather, the point is that our belief in God floats off and away from the world if what we will or won’t believe leaves us with an idea that the things of God are “spiritual” and so *outside* the world, and that whatever *evil* is it is something which resides *in* the world as only a historical, secular or human reality. If we really can’t believe in evil spirits – and I doubt that many of us actually can – then we must also dispense with the idea that God is a “spiritual” reality if the idea of “spirit” separates God from the world. We need to think the tangible world as the realm of spirit, or spirit as the worldly realm.

It’s not overstating the issue to say that the future of the church hangs on an understanding of what this means – not only the future of our congregation but of Christian faith itself.

The critical point has been that God deals with us as we are, here and now – not with a view to changing us into some perfect ideal of a human being, but to bring life to the kinds of people our particular history has made us. It is as we are – formed by our

particular culture and history – that God addresses us. It is through the ideas and expectations of our particular world that we are called to faithfulness and trust.

This means that if, as is largely the case in our society today, there is really no other intangible “heavenly” world where powers for good and evil reside, then it’s in this very tangible and real world that we will meet God, in and through what we touch and do.

If God has no other heaven than the world in which we now live and move and have our being, then that world becomes the means of God’s work with us. If, as our modern society has come to understand, evil can only be believed to exist in the ins and outs of the historical world – and not in some spiritual realm floating above us – then this is also the place where *God* is found. God is found nowhere else but in the world we can touch and see, because there is nowhere “else” for God to be. The battlefields of heaven and hell are the battlefields of our lives here and now. It is in the very midst of our lives that Paul’s “spiritual” battles take place. Or, to put it more clearly, our struggles in the world are precisely *spiritual* struggles.

In view of the struggle of faith Paul describes, he calls us to “tool up” – to be equipped with the armour and the weapons which God provides for the purpose of standing firm in the promise of the full humanity of Jesus Christ becoming ours: the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, as shoes whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

But just as the forces for good and the forces for evil are not wafty spiritual entities doing their thing in some invisible space, so also the belt of truth and the breastplate of righteousness and the shield of faith and so on are not just nice Christian ideas to nod our heads at. They are not “spiritual” things in heads and hearts. These are *disciplines* – *practices* – which will necessarily mark every believer who is seriously engaged in the struggle for an authentic human and Christian existence. If God’s place is in the world, so also are God’s ways with us “worldly”. We find a firm footing in life by attention to God’s calling, through practice and discipline, through study and prayer and fellowship and lives lived in accordance with God’s patterns for how we ought to relate to each other. As we can learn and be influenced and trained by negative influences, so also we must continually be learning and training ourselves in faith.

Paul’s claim is that it is hard *work* being a Christian because, the forces arrayed against human freedom are they are powerful in a very worldly sense. There is much to hold us back, much to limit us, much to tempt us into less than the fullness of life for which we were created.

We are called, then, to stand firm in all that God has given as resources for growing in faith and understanding, for defending what God has already made of us, and for working with God in making further inroads into the realms of darkness and captivity, that the world might take hope in the promise of light and freedom.

Paul ends his letter to the Ephesians with a call to them, and to us: Stand firm. Grow. Do not look back. Look only forward to the life to which we are all called, secured by what God has given us for the purpose.

This doesn’t happen as if by magic. One Christian commentator has remarked that one of the reasons our Christian faith often doesn’t make sense to us is that we lack practices which reflect it and make it real. If God is only a matter of head and heart – and in this sense only “spiritual” – then the things of God will make little sense in a world less about spirit than it is about what we actually *do*, touch and manipulate. Christian faith rests on habits and patterns which will strengthen us in lives of love and righteousness.

God is faithful.

If God will meet us with grace when we fail in our discipleship, how much more will God meet and strengthen us if we seek earnestly to be shaped by growing in knowledge and understanding, in the practice of prayer, in love and service, and in active commitment to peace in the world which God is healing.

Stand firm, Paul says to us. Continue not only to “believe” but to *look like* people who believe – people whose faith is not realised elsewhere but in the shape of the lives they live.

It is by God’s own grace that we might do this; let us, then, claim that grace, and give it form in lives which claim this world as God’s own.
