

## **Sermon for Andrew Gall's Induction**

**23 August 2006, Pentecost 12**

### **Ephesians 6:10-20**

The induction of a minister into a placement is always a cause for celebration. The induction marks a new beginning in the ministry of both the minister and the congregations involved, and that is always exciting. But I think that there's a particular joy about today's service, when Andrew is inducted as minister to this new combination of the congregations of Woodend, Tylden and Gisborne. There certainly is for me; I've spent the past couple of months rejoicing that I'm going to have a Uniting Church colleague in placement in the Macedon Ranges. I've also been making cunning plans about handing various Gisborne-based responsibilities over to Andrew, but I'll give him time to settle in properly before we have that discussion.

The joy and excitement of an induction service doesn't imply that everything will be easy for the people involved. I've occasionally thought that the process of placing a minister is something like making an arranged marriage. The minister and the congregations don't really know much about each other. There's some information, a lot of it on paper, and maybe a couple of slightly awkward meetings in which all parties are on their best behaviour. Both parties need to trust the presbytery, playing the role of matchmaker, when they suggest that this minister and this placement have the potential for a long, happy and fruitful relationship.

In today's case, the match is not just between Andrew and the congregations. It is also between Gisborne, and Woodend and Tylden. Andrew's induction marks the beginning of the three congregations working together in a new way, sharing Andrew's ministry. There are a couple of arranged marriages happening here, and we hope that they will both be successful.

A long, happy and fruitful relationship doesn't mean that it will be without its problems – which is possibly another way in which a placement resembles a marriage. Every congregation has its own ideas about what a minister should be like, and every minister has images of their ideal congregation. The reality is always going to be different. Being Church is not necessarily easy, for anyone. And at this point I could stop and let the author of the letter to the Ephesians take over completely, because today's reading, from the end of that letter, is a mini-sermon aimed at inspiring and encouraging the Church in the challenges that it faces.

Over the past couple of months the lectionary has taken us through the letter to the Ephesians. I'm always struck by the coincidence that every three years, as the national Assembly of the Uniting Church meets, the lectionary does its bit by reminding us through this letter of the true nature of the Church. It is equally useful here, as the congregations of Woodend and Tylden and Gisborne, embodiments in their place of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church, enter a new stage of their ministry. The Church, according to the letter to the Ephesians, is a cosmic reality, a universal phenomenon, which will ultimately include all of creation. It is the body of Christ; with Christ as its only head. The letter tells us that by being part of the Church, members of the body of Christ, we are participants in the victory that Christ has already won. Members of the Church share in Christ's resurrection; we have already been raised up.

But here in today's reading, as the letter ends, the author reminds us that it's not necessarily easy or safe to be members of the Church and followers of Christ. The world is often an unfriendly place for those who love God. The author knows that there will be attacks to our

spiritual integrity from hidden forces. And so he gives us advice. We are to arm ourselves with truth, righteousness, faith, salvation, the word of God and the gospel of peace.

It is somewhat counter-intuitive for Christians to be told to arm ourselves in order to proclaim peace. This is where we need the help of the historians. They tell us that the armour that the writer of Ephesians describes as ‘the whole armour of God’ was based on the outfit of a Roman soldier, but a Roman soldier who is missing his battle-axe, sling, bow and arrows, heavy and light spears, dagger, greaves. The armour of God that the Christian is to put on is defensive. The soldier who wears it is ready to resist attack, not to attack others. The metaphorical armour of God includes one weapon, but in a world that knew of long-range weapons like spears, arrows, slingshots and axes, that one weapon is the short-range sword.

So, the military equipment the Christian is given is for the purposes of defence and resistance. What is it that we’re called to resist? According to this passage, it is *not* other human beings. We are not facing blood and flesh, but what the author of Ephesians describes as spiritual powers. One commentator describes these things as “oppressive authorities and sanctions”, and “entire systems of violence and despair”.<sup>1</sup> The Jewish author of Ephesians told his Gentile readers that Christ had brought Jews and Gentiles into one group and broken down the dividing wall between them.<sup>2</sup> We’re called to stand firm against everything that is contrary to this gospel of peace, everything that tries to rebuild or maintain the barriers between people that Christ broke down. We’re to resist anything that opposes the peace of God. That there are such forces is undeniable. Bill Loader suggests that Ephesians issues “a call for people to abandon a Christian naiveté that fails to recognise the potent forces that bring destruction and division in our world”.<sup>3</sup> What we are to do when we encounter these forces is to resist them, to stand firm against them.

We are also asked to use the one offensive weapon that we’ve been given, the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. We are not called merely to *stand* against the forces of destruction, but to *challenge* them with the gospel, the good news that in Christ all divisions have been destroyed, and love and hope and peace have won their ultimate victory. At the end of this letter about the nature of the Church, we are given guidance on what acting as the Church involves. It is in its resistance to the forces of evil, its working for peace, its prayer for the community, that the Church lives out its calling as the body of Christ.

The author of the letter draws on a tradition of the armour of the Lord that comes from Isaiah and the Wisdom of Solomon. But unlike those images, in this letter the armour of God is not just for the Lord or the Messiah. *Every* Christian is called to arm themselves, to resist the forces of evil and to proclaim the gospel of peace. At the end of the letter the author asks the saints to express their solidarity with him through prayer; prayer for him and prayer for all the saints. The body of Christ has many members, with many different callings, some to be ambassadors for the gospel, some to pray, all to live out the gospel. Andrew has been called to ministry here, to minister together with all the saints, as they all encourage and support each other. He can no more minister alone, without the support and cooperation of the congregations, that Paul could minister without the support and cooperation of the saints. The members of the congregations may be very

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Olson, “Thinking and Practicing Reconciliation”: The Ephesians Texts for Pentecost 8-14’, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 2:14.

<sup>3</sup> <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/BEpPentecost12.htm>

excited that Andrew is being inducted here, but not because they're going to have less to do! Their ministries continue.

When Jesus asked the disciples if they wanted to leave him they answered: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."<sup>4</sup> Two thousand years later we are here for the same reason. Where else can we go? This is where God has called us to be. Today we celebrate that God has called Andrew to be here, in the Macedon Ranges, ministering to these particular congregations. It won't necessarily be easy. But we know that God will be with Andrew and his family, with the congregations of Tylden and Woodend and Gisborne, with all the Churches of the Macedon Ranges, with Port Phillip West presbytery. Knowing that, I'm going to end with the words that end the letter to the Ephesians, offering them particularly to Andrew, Kareen, Hannah, David, Caleb and the people of Woodend, Tylden and Gisborne: "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." Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> John 6:68-69.