

## Sermon for Romsey and Lancefield Uniting Churches

23 August 2006, Pentecost 12

### Ephesians 6:10-20

There's definitely a place for violence in my life. I'm a collector of comic books; a watcher of sci-fi television and films; a reader of fantasy and crime novels. I have no problem with Spider-man beating up the Green Goblin, or Buffy staking vampires, or any of the residents of Narnia or Middle-Earth using swords and arrows. I cheer when Luke Skywalker blows up the Death Star. In certain genres and for certain purposes I am extremely comfortable with violence. But for me those genres don't include scripture, and those purposes don't include the revelation and worship of God.

History teaches us that connecting religion and war is profoundly dangerous. It can lead to crusades and military jihads, to the demonisation of opponents, to the justification of war crimes committed in the name of God. When it comes to faith, I prefer to turn to the theme of peace-making and responding to hatred with love that makes up most of the New Testament. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told the people: 'You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also'.<sup>1</sup> Paul advised the Romans: 'Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them ... Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.'<sup>2</sup> Christians celebrate the coming of Christ as the Prince of Peace, giving himself up to death rather than allowing his disciples to defend him with swords.

So, how does the advice of the writer of the letter to the Ephesians, that we need to put on the whole armour of God, fit with these more common messages of peace in the gospel? What does this passage about arming ourselves for the struggle against the rulers, the authorities, the cosmic powers of this present darkness and the spiritual forces of evil have to offer us?

Historians 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. This metaphorical use of battle imagery isn't surprising; the military might of the Romans was obvious throughout their empire. But what is striking in the description of the armour of God that the Christian is to put on is that it 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. The Christian who has put on the armour of God is ready to resist.

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's *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>3</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

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5:38-39.

<sup>2</sup> Romans 12:14, 17-18.

<sup>3</sup> Ronald Olson, "'Thinking and Practicing Reconciliation': The Ephesians Texts for Pentecost 8-14", Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, 1997.

wall, the hostility between them.<sup>4</sup> We are 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 are 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>5</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 we have 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.

The Letter to the Ephesians is full of the language of peace; peace given by God’s plan of salvation, harmoniously uniting all things in heaven and on earth in Christ. The author has previously begged the people he now asks to arm themselves to “lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”<sup>6</sup>

The apparent contradiction of military equipment being used in the service of the gospel of peace is not the only paradox in this passage. At the end of the passage the reader is reminded of Paul, an ambassador in chains, asking from the Ephesians prayers to enable him to preach the gospel. The idea of someone in prison being able to convert anybody is ludicrous. The oxymoron of an ambassador, someone with diplomatic immunity, being in chains, is equally bizarre. These contradictions and paradoxes point us back to that great paradox; the victory won by God over all the powers through the naked defencelessness of the crucified Christ; the glory of God seen on the cross. In the light of that one immense paradox, the possibility of an ambassador in chains; people arming themselves to proclaim the gospel of peace; and military metaphors containing words of faith seem much less bizarre.

The letter to the Ephesians has described the church as a cosmic reality, a universal phenomenon, which will ultimately include all of creation, and the body of Christ; with Christ as its only head. The letter describes being part of the church, a member of the body of Christ, as being part of the victory that Christ has won. Members of the Church share in Christ’s resurrection; we have already been made alive and raised up. But that does not mean that it is easy or safe to be members of the Church and followers of Christ. The world is not a friendly place for those who love God. The author of the letter to the Ephesians knows that there will be attacks to our spiritual integrity from hidden forces. And so here, at the end of the letter, he gives us the advice to arm ourselves with truth, righteousness, faith, salvation, the word of God and the gospel of peace. And to pray. Pray in the Spirit at all times. Pray for all the saints. Pray that the gospel may be boldly proclaimed. 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. This is the message of the letter to the Ephesians, and it is one as relevant today as it was when the letter was first written.

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<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 2:14.

<sup>5</sup> <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/BEpPentecost12.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 4:1-3.