

**10.00 am SERVICE ... 26th August, 2012 ... Pent 13 Year B
Balwyn North**

Bible readings: Ephesians 6: 10-20; Psalm 84; John 6:56-69

Theme: "I bind unto myself today; the strong name of the Trinity."

There is a rich banquet of difficult themes in today's readings:
The gospel passage's explicit language about feeding on the flesh and blood of Jesus;
Or the image of the whole armour of God that is central to the reading from the letter to the Ephesians.

To name but two!

And it is this Ephesians passage that I want to explore a little this morning.

And before we go any further let us own our problems with this text.

There is something discomfiting about this military imagery used in service of a gospel message which includes the injunction by the Lord "to love our enemies."

I remember when I was minister at Bairnsdale there was a Christian book shop in the town which actually overall offered quite a good service to the town. For the entire time the book shop was running sitting on the top shelf of one display case in the shop sat a couple of plastic play suits of the "whole armour" God which did not sell. I was never tempted to buy them for a children's time in worship ... they somehow seemed not only kitsch but also crass.

We know too well the destruction that has been wrought by armoured armies claiming to be in the service of God but clearly in the service of other forces.

But, sisters and brothers, just because we may struggle at one level with the imagery in this text does not mean we should pay no heed to it: there is important teaching here that we ignore at our peril. Bill Loader (the Western Australian based biblical scholar and Uniting Church minister) says that the writer of today's passage is calling the members of the church community to "abandon a Christian naivety about destructive forces" in the world.¹

The writer of the letter to the Ephesians tells his readers that Christians are engaged in a struggle not with enemies of blood and flesh but against rulers, authorities, cosmic powers and the spiritual forces of evil.

What the writer is saying is that the struggle of those who seek to walk the way of Christ is not with human beings per se (all of whom we are called to value) but with dark forces that can seduce any of us.

I am something of a fan of the *Lord of the Rings* books and films. The heart of Tolkien's epic story of titanic struggles between good and evil and based on his own experience of the horrors of the First World War I think helps us to grasp the point that is being made in this ancient Biblical letter.

Those of you who are familiar with Tolkien's story know that at its heart there is grand battle to gain a precious ring: the ring that bestows on its wearer immense dark power.

How does the rhyme go?

¹ William Loader, First Thoughts on Year B Epistle Passages from the Lectionary, <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/BEpPentecost13.html>
Accessed 24/08/2012

Three Rings for the Elven-kings under the sky,
Seven for the Dwarf-lords in the halls of stone,
Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die,
One for the Dark Lord on his dark throne
in the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.
One Ring to rule them all... ²

And, of course, it is the gentle and honest, good hobbits who are the ones to eventually destroy that Ring and the curse it brings on so many.

Now I was chatting with a wise friend of mine recently about people in positions of power in the church and other institutions and she began talking about Tolkien's story.

She said that she realised from her own experience that once you get to wear the ring of authority and power even for a little while it can grab hold of you and it becomes terribly difficult to give up.

Giving in to the temptation to keep wearing the ring of authority and power is not just something that happens to oppressive dictators or Lords of Mordor in grand mythic stories; it can happen to any one of us at any point in our daily living.

In the church, over the years, I have witnessed too often an unwillingness on the part of someone to hand over responsibility for a particular role to others and don't get me started on power struggles over the control of church kitchens!

What the writer of the letter to the Ephesians is clear about is that we are engaged in a struggle ... a struggle with powers which can

² J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the ring: being the first part of the Lord of the rings*, Houghton Mifflin Co., New York, 1954, unnumbered opening page.

drag us ... anyone of us along a path antithetical to the way of Christ.

William Willimon, the great US Methodist bishop, theologian and preacher has written about how these powers are very much part of the culture that we exist in each and every moment of the day: he warns of how easy it is to fall foul of the control of ideologies like unfettered materialism and consumerism.³

His words always come to mind when I wander through those modern cathedrals of consumerism: shopping centres!

So we know about this reality ... the powers with which we struggle each day ... but where do we find resources to respond?

The opening to today's passage gives the key to the crucial resource for the struggle: "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power."

One commentator suggests that this is best understood as meaning "be empowered by the Lord" or "find your strength in the Lord."⁴

And what this empowerment involves is illustrated by the writer with the image of the basic kit for a Roman soldier:

- The "belt of truth;"
- The "breastplate of righteousness,"
- Footgear that "will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace;"
- The "shield of faith;"
- The helmet of "salvation;"

³ Martin B. Copenhaver, Anthony B. Robinson, William H. Willimon, *Good news in exile: three pastors offer a hopeful vision for the church*, William B., Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, 1999. p.56

⁴ C. Leslie Mitton, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Ephesians*, Marshall Morgan and Scott Publishing Ltd., London, 1973, p. 220.

- And the “sword of the Spirit which is the word of God.”

Truth rather than spin and lies;

Righteousness or justice ... that is right relationships at the heart of things rather than many other destructive and damaging possibilities such as seeking to hold onto the ring of power;

A readiness to go and declare **good news of God’s**

peace/Shalom/wholeness over against running to share something that brings anything but wholeness like lies and gossip;

Faith ... trusting in God;

Salvation ... holding onto hope;

The Word of God which can be understood as being all about getting to the truth of things.⁵

Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, word of God ... resources for rich and abundant living empowered by Christ.

The passage concludes with another resource ... not as part of the armour but as an extra element ... prayer.

The imagery of the whole armour of God and the commendation to be “empowered by the Lord” reminded me of a particular prayer: that ancient Irish/Celtic Christian prayer from the 5th -7th centuries, the so-called “Breastplate of St Patrick.”

John Davies, and Anglican priest and bishop who spent many years in ministry in South Africa facing the destructive and oppressive power of apartheid has written a wonderful reflective book on the “Breastplate of St. Patrick” called *A song for every morning*. The “Breastplate” begins with words “I bind unto myself...” John Davies therefore describes the prayer as being like the clothes the “...Christian pilgrim puts on at the beginning of the day, just as we lace up our shoes or button up our coats.” He continues:

⁵ William Loader, *op.cit.*

This idea goes back to Chapter 6 of the Letter to the Ephesians. In his prison cell, the apostle Paul is able to observe the military equipment of the guard who is keeping him captive. Paul is freer than his guards; all they can do is imprison their victim. The apostle is free to think and sing and pray; with this freedom, he is able to check through the instruments of death and domination, the items of uniform representing an empire of oppression and violence, the insignia of a system that crucified the Son of God. He is able to reinvent them as images of God’s equipment, the trousers of truth, the shirt of justice, the boots of peace, and so on.⁶

Davies writes about how during his many years in South Africa he would put on each morning the “Breastplate” as his protection and identity; as his defence against the “heresies and cruelties of apartheid.”⁷

Sisters and brothers as we journey in a culture increasingly antagonistic to the way of Christ ... a culture wherein destructive powers of many kinds can seduce us let us bind ourselves to the one who empowers us to walk the path of truth, right relationships, peace, faith and salvation ... the one who came to bring life and life in all its fullness!

We bind unto ourselves today the strong name of Trinity, by invocation of the same, The Three in One, and One in Three.

⁶ John Davies, *A song for every morning: dedication and defiance with St Patrick’s breastplate*, Canterbury press, Norwich, 2008, p.1-2.

⁷ John Davies, *op.cit.*, p.2.

We bind this day to us forever, by power of faith, Christ's incarnation...

We bind unto ourselves today the virtues of the starlit heaven...

We bind unto ourselves today the power of God to hold and lead...

Against all Satan's spells and wiles, against false words of heresy, against the knowledge that defiles, against the heart's idolatry, against the wizard's evil craft, against the death wound and the burning, the choking wave, the poisoned shaft, protect us Christ until your returning.

Christ be with us, Christ within us, Christ behind us, Christ before us, Christ beside us, Christ to win us, Christ to comfort and restore us, Christ beneath us, Christ above us, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger, Christ in hearts of all that love us, Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

(Together in Song 478, Version by Cecil Frances Alexander. Modified by the author)

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