

Parish of Central Exeter

12th Sunday after Trinity 22 August 2021

The whole armour of God

This week we have reached the famous passage in Ephesians in which we hear about the armour of God.

The reflections on this reading are from Chris Bryan, and the intercessions are from Helen. Many thanks to you both.



Welcome everyone.

Preparing for worship

Introduction

The four readings appointed for today are:

- I Kings 8:(1, 6, 10-11), 22-30, 41-43. The ark of the covenant is placed inside the newly completed Temple and King Solomon offers his prayers to God.
- Psalm 84 The joy of worshipping in the temple.
- John 6: 56-69 Jesus uses his own flesh as an image for finding life in him – words which prove so off-putting that many of his disciples decide against following him any further.
- Ephesians 6:10-20 Paul uses the imagery of military uniform as a call to be 'fully clothed' for combat against all the powers of evil and goes on to set the standard for prayer and spiritual alertness –we must be nothing less than constant.

We shall only use the Psalm and the Ephesians passage in our service today, but if you do choose to follow all four readings, there is a common thread of 'extreme' or 'wholehearted', depending perhaps on your point of view. Most of or all of each reading is in direct speech – which gives an immediacy to the readings, and begs us to consider our response. Are there elements that are too extreme, or do we buy into this wholeheartedly. Does this reflect in our responses to the last ten days or so in Afghanistan?

Call to Worship

We are called to live in love.

**We cannot do this alone,
we dare not try this alone,
so we gather as God's people.**

We are called to love our neighbours as ourselves.

**We come to build up Christ's Body,
in humility and gentleness,
with patience and love.**

We are called to speak words that give grace to those who hear.

**We rejoice in our oneness in Christ;
we would share the grace offered to us.**

We are called to put away falsehood, bitterness and anger
And to live as God's family.

**We gather as God's family
seeking to be fed by the Bread of life.**

Opening Prayer

It is good to be here in your presence Lord.

Here we are at home with each other and with you.

Here we discover the joy of life and the strength to live each day
with praise in our hearts to you.

You alone are God!

You alone can show us the way to the life that lasts forever.

We love you, Lord,

and we lift this prayer in adoration of your holy name. **Amen.**

(posted on SermonHelp.com.)

Gathering Hymn

'Hail to the Lord's anointed' Sung here by a group from Victoria Methodist Church, Bristol.
Words are on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uO2ru0vRv3Q>

An act of confession

Too often, Lord God,

we are hesitant in our proclamation;

seeking safe and suitable opportunities to speak of our faith.

Too often, Lord God,

we are half-hearted in our service;

reluctant to stand out from the crowd or to attract criticism.

Too often, Lord God,

we live as if dependent wholly on our own resources;

relying on our perceived skills and modest insights.

Too often, Lord God,
we look to the clouds for our inspiration,
in the vain hope of finding you there.

Forgive the poverty of our efforts and the frailty of our faith
and open wide our hearts and minds to the immanent presence
of our Risen, Living and Ascended Lord Jesus Christ .
In his name we pray.

(Church of Scotland)

Assurance of Pardon

Scripture says that those who are in Christ are a new creation;
everything old has passed away;
see, the new has come!

Hear then Christ's word of grace to us:
'Your sins are forgiven.'

Thanks be to God.



The collect for today

Almighty and everlasting God,
you are always more ready to hear than we to pray
and to give more than either we desire or deserve:
pour down upon us the abundance of your mercy,
forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid
and giving us those good things
which we are not worthy to ask
but through the merits and mediation
of Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Psalm 84

For the director of music. According to gittith. Of the Sons of Korah. A psalm.

- ¹ How lovely is your dwelling-place,
LORD Almighty!
- ² My soul yearns, even faints,
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh cry out
for the living God.
- ³ Even the sparrow has found a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may have her young –
a place near your altar,
LORD Almighty, my King and my God.
- ⁴ Blessed are those who dwell in your house;
they are ever praising you.
- ⁵ Blessed are those whose strength is in you,
whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.
- ⁶ As they pass through the Valley of Baka,
they make it a place of springs;
the autumn rains also cover it with pools.
- ⁷ They go from strength to strength,
till each appears before God in Zion.
- ⁸ Hear my prayer, LORD God Almighty;
listen to me, God of Jacob.
- ⁹ Look on our shield, O God;
look with favour on your anointed one.
- ¹⁰ Better is one day in your courts
than a thousand elsewhere;
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than dwell in the tents of the wicked.
- ¹¹ For the LORD God is a sun and shield;
the LORD bestows favour and honour;
no good thing does he withhold
from those whose way of life is blameless.
- ¹² LORD Almighty,
blessed is the one who trusts in you.



Solomon's Temple (digital reconstruction)

Worship music

'Christ is made the sure foundation'. Sung by the Festival Choir. The background video is of a reconstruction of the Temple in Jerusalem at the time of Christ. Words are on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W5Jz8xYiGM8>

New Testament Reading

Ephesians 6: 10-20

The Whole Armour of God

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹ Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹² For our struggle is not against enemies of 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.

¹³ Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵ As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

¹⁸ Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. ¹⁹ Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

Reflection

The Armour of God.

We have been reflecting in previous weeks on the Letter to the Ephesians, which is in its form perhaps a homily rather than a letter, and an example of what rhetoricians contemporary with Paul would have called "panegyric"—that is, *speech in praise* of something. Ephesians, of course, is particularly concerned to praise God: more precisely, to praise what God has done and is doing for God's people through Jesus Christ—the implications of which, however, go far beyond God's people. From its very beginning, Ephesians makes clear that the redemption which God is bringing about is *cosmic*. Hence it is the true hope of the entire created order, for it is God's will

To sum up all things in Christ,
the things on heaven and the things on earth. (Eph. 1.10b)

Such faith and hope, declared in the opening verses of Ephesians, are the basis on which the rest of the homily builds, including 6.10-20, the famous “whole armour of God” passage, which is our particular reading for this Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity.

We may conveniently divide our passage into three parts:

1. *Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of 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.*

The Ephesians are to place their trust in nothing less than the power of God, and nothing less than the power of God is what they need, for the evil that opposes them in life is more than merely human. In Paul’s view—and it is the biblical view—humankind is not alone in being rebellious against God and God’s grace. There are in the universe other “cosmic powers of this present darkness” that are in rebellion against God, and they will overcome us if they can.

For some moderns, such ideas are to be equated with old-fashioned pictures of devils with a horn and a tail, being simply too crude and unscientific to be taken seriously. Others, contemplating the monstrous evils that have been perpetrated throughout history, apparently through human agency and not infrequently even in the name of religion, may well ask whether there is not indeed at work here a malignancy greater than can be explained by merely human evil: a malignancy that can lead the same humankind that produces a Saint Francis and a Mother Theresa, an Albert Schweitzer and a Florence Nightingale, to produce also the horrors of Auschwitz and Hiroshima.

Whatever our opinions as regards that debate, and however we choose to characterise evil or its origin, it is beyond doubt that life and history confront us with much that *is* evil, and in our own strength we may well feel unable to stand before it. Paul, however, declares that God has provided us with a refuge in our plight. The prophet Isaiah, centuries before Paul, had used the metaphor of God’s armour. Seeing the world’s injustice, Isaiah said, God acted:

He put on righteousness like a breastplate,
and a helmet of salvation on his head

(Isa. 59.17)

Such armour, Paul declares to the Ephesians, will also be God’s gift to them if they choose to take it, and will enable them to stand against their enemy.

2. *Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to*

proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Pursuing the metaphor, Paul goes on to list six elements in this armour, modelled no doubt on the weapons and armour of a Roman legionary in his own day, and gives to each element a metaphorical sense.

- (i) *Belt*: this most likely refers to a leather apron that was worn by legionaries both for protection and to allow freedom of movement. Paul, however, associates it with “truth (*alētheia*)”. The essential thing implied by the word “truth” as Paul and his audience will have understood it was not (as perhaps with us) something that was *accurate*, but rather *something that may be relied on*—as when we speak of a friend who is “true”—someone you can trust, someone who is faithful. So whose “truth” is Paul talking about? This is God’s armour, and so of course it is God’s truth and God’s reliability that are here in mind. God is true, Paul says, and that truth, if we take it to ourselves, will serve both for our protection and as our only firm basis for action.

The Roman soldier’s “belt” was also used to secure the next item of his equipment, which was the

- (ii) *Breastplate*: the Greek word here is *thōrax*, which is used at different periods to refer to virtually anything that protects the chest. Again, Paul probably had in mind the standard equipment of a Roman legionary. The metaphorical *thōrax* of which he speaks is, however, God’s “righteousness (*dikaïosunē*)”. The word “*dikaïosunē* / righteousness” means not “virtue” (as we tend to understand it) but rather *loyalty* and *faithfulness*. God is faithful and loyal towards us: and that faithfulness and loyalty mean that God will stick by us even though we are sinners, which indeed we all are (Rom. 3.23, 11.32). This “righteousness”, together with the “truth” of which we previously spoke, are the basis of the “armour” that God gives us.
- (iii) *Shoes*: Paul perhaps has in mind here the heavy boots (*caliga*) of a Roman legionary. These gave strength for long marches and for standing firm in battle. The gospel was above all “the good news of peace”—peace between God and humankind. Such was the message of the angels to the shepherds at the birth of Christ (Luke 1.14). And the knowledge of such peace is the footwear in which believers may indeed hope to stand firm, despite their personal weakness and failings.
- (iv) *Shield*: the Greek word is *thurios*, derived from the word for “door”. It describes a large, door shaped shield: in other words, Paul is evidently thinking of the heavy square shield (Latin: *scutum*) carried by a Roman legionary of the period, which was effective both defensively against missiles and offensively when a detachment of legionaries might advance with shields side by side and a cover of shields above their heads. For Paul

the Christian's shield is "faith"—God's faithfulness to us, inviting our faith in return: a shield with which the Christian may indeed "be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one".

- (v) *Helmet*: Paul is probably picturing the helmet with cheek pieces of a Roman legionary. But this helmet is "of salvation (*sōtērios*)"—that is, of "deliverance": God's deliverance from what oppresses us, whether it be sin or, finally, death itself.
- (vi) *Sword*: the legionary, of course, carried a sword: short and straight. Paul, however, speaks of "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God". The writer to the Hebrews also associates God's word with a blade, speaking of it as "quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, ... a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Heb. 4.12). Here in Ephesians Paul speaks of God's Word as "the sword of the Spirit". "Spirit" (Hebrew *ruach*, Greek *pneuma*: both meaning "breath" or "wind") is a word that the Bible uses frequently to speak of God's living, creative, dynamic power—God's "breath"—working in and through humankind and the created order. So, for example, Isaiah looks for "the Spirit of the LORD" to rest on Israel's ideal king (Isa. 11.11-2: for other examples of God's creative "breath" bringing order out of chaos or life out of death cf. Gen. 1.2-5, Ezek. 37.1-14). Paul evidently identifies our prayers as one such of work of the Spirit, and in particular that prayer in which the Spirit prays with us (Rom. 8.26-27). It is that kind of prayer—prayer "in the Spirit" about which he will now go on to speak.

3. *Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.*

As the Ephesians seek to take to themselves God's faithfulness and grace as their armour and shield, so they are asked to pray "in the Spirit"—that is, in the power of God that lives in them and breathes through them in virtue of their baptism. They are to offer prayer for *all*, but especially for their fellow Christians and for Paul himself. Evidently in prison, Paul does not hesitate to refer to his own personal situation. He does not, however, ask the Ephesians to pray for his release or even his safety, but that he may speak with "boldness"—the Greek word is *parrēsia*, a word that is used in Acts to describe the way in which apostles freely and bravely give their testimony (e.g. Acts 2.29, 4.29, 31).

What Paul must speak *about* is the "mystery of the gospel"—that is, the truth about God's love and grace that was hidden in past ages but has finally and definitively been shown to us in Jesus Christ—the "mystery" of God's eternal purpose "to sum up all things in Christ" with which his homily began. On behalf of this "mystery", Paul says, he himself is "an ambassador in chains"—a wonderful expression in which he expresses at once his sense

that he has been empowered by God to speak the truth of God's grace, and also that his "chains" are not things that make him bitter or angry, but rather the signs and pledges of his office as ambassador—that is, as representative, as qualified plenipotentiary—on behalf of the One who Himself, "did not think equality with God" was something to be exploited, but "humbled himself, being found in fashion as a man"—and so shared the common human lot "even in unto death" (Philip. 2.6, 8).

We may surely ask for nothing less than the same endurance for ourselves and our communities as we seek in our own time and place to be faithful to God and God's world. And what is that time and place? Many things, no doubt, for many people. God does not create two snowflakes alike, let alone two human lives. Yet we also have things in common. Our own Bishop Robert, in his July 2021 *ad clerum* letter, quotes words of St Cyprian of Carthage about these things we have in common, and I can think of no better way to end these notes than by quoting them too. In third century Carthage in North Africa there was a virulent outbreak of plague. Cyprian the bishop, reflecting on its impact, wrote:

'Some talk as if being a Christian guarantees the enjoyment of happiness in this world and immunity from contact with illness, rather than preparing us to endure adversity in the faith that our full happiness is reserved for the future. It troubles some that death has no favourites. And yet what is there in this world that is not common to all? Diseases of the eye, attacks of fever, weakness in limbs, are as common to Christians as to anyone else because they are the lot of all who bear human flesh. What distinguishes the righteous should be our capacity for endurance.' (*On the Mortality Rate*, 8, 11-13)

Bishop Robert comments, "This is God's world and God invites us to build communities of grace that speak of hope." The Letter to the Ephesians teaches us to do precisely that. To which teaching we must surely say, "Amen!"

Worship music

'Lord of our life and God of our salvation', sung here by the choir of York Minster. It seems an appropriate hymn for the theme. Words are below.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ca1H4-AVm-0>

Lord of our life, and God of our salvation,
Star of our night, and Hope of every nation,
Hear and receive Thy church's supplication,
Lord God Almighty.

See round Thine ark the hungry billows curling!
See how Thy foes their banners are unfurling!
Lord, while their darts envenomed they are hurling,
Thou canst preserve us.

Lord, Thou canst help when earthly armour faileth;
Lord, Thou canst save when sin itself assaileth;
Lord, o'er Thy rock nor death nor hell prevaieth;
Grant us Thy peace, Lord.

Peace, in our hearts, our evil thoughts assuaging,
Peace, in Thy church, where brothers are engaging,
Peace, when the world its busy war is waging;
Calm Thy foes' raging!

Grant us Thy help till backward they are driven;
Grant them Thy truth, that they may be forgiven;
Grant peace on earth, or after we have striven,
Peace in Thy heaven.

Intercessions

Generous God, we thank you for the blessings that we enjoy and can sometimes take for granted: a peaceful and democratic society: a legal framework of human rights: access to education and healthcare; sanitation, food, and clean water. We pray for our neighbours in the UK and across the world who lack these things. And we pray in particular today for the people of Afghanistan.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Reliable God, we thank you for your truth; for your loyalty and faithfulness; for your peace; for the gift of faith; and for your deliverance from what oppresses us. As individuals, as this church and as the whole Church, may we be open to God's Spirit flowing through us to help us be co-creators of your Kingdom.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Creator God, we thank you for your Creation in all its beauty and for the communities it sustains. We pray that those in authority will act in the best interests of the planet and its human inhabitants. May we each play our small part as custodians of your Creation.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Loving God, we thank you for our own communities here in Exeter – for our families, friends and neighbours. May we be a community of grace that offers them hope. We remember the departed and ask for your comfort for those who mourn. We pray for those who are suffering in mind or body. And in a moment of silence we hold before you those people who are in our heart and minds now...

[short silence]

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Holy God, we thank you for your Spirit praying in and through us. May we pray with love and sincerity in the knowledge of your abiding presence.

Merciful God, accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen



The Lord's Prayer

Loving Creator we honour you,
and we honour all that you have made.
Renew the whole world in the image of your love.
Give us what we need for today,
and a hunger to see the whole world fed.
Strengthen us for what lies ahead;
heal us from the hurts of the past;
give us courage to follow your call in this moment.
For your love is the only power,
the only home, the only honour we need,
in this world and in the world to come.
Amen. *(Paraphrased by Sarah Dylan Breuer)*

Affirmation

Faith demands choice.
By the grace of Christ, we can choose.

We choose to believe
that light is better than darkness,
sharing is better than hoarding,
truth is better than deceit,
mercy is better than revenge,
love is better than indifference,
God is stronger than chaos.

We choose to have faith in the God who is love
and choice will verify itself
on the long and narrow road of life.

By grace, we choose to choose faith.
Thanks be to God!

(posted on Bruce Prewer's Home Page.)

The Peace

If alone, smile and hug yourself (God does). If otherwise, share the Peace as appropriate.

A short Spiritual Communion

The Book of Common Prayer reminds us that if we offer ourselves in penitence and faith, giving thanks for the redemption won by Christ crucified, we may truly 'eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ', even when we cannot receive the sacrament physically in ourselves.



Lord, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

O God,
help me to trust you,
help me to know that you are with me,
help me to believe that nothing
can separate me from your love
revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

An offertory prayer

We may not be in church, but we can still offer ourselves and our talents to God.

Blessed are you, God and creator of the universe,
as we offer you our activities, thanksgivings and our life.
We present ourselves, and our world, as we are and as you can make us,
for everything in heaven and on earth is yours,
and of your own do we give you. Blessed be God for ever.

Because there is no Breaking and Sharing we can have only Spiritual Communion with Christ. I'm sure you can find a way to use a few minutes of silence or conversation to enjoy this, and make it a sacramental moment.

As we prepare for communion you might like to listen to the Langford Singers with 'Bread is Broken', words by Richard, music by Nigel.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-WUE5nrlw4>

Giving thanks for Christ's death and resurrection you may wish to say

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits you have given me,
for all the pains and insults you have borne for me.
Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally,
I ask you to come spiritually into my heart.
O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
may I know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.

Post Communion Collect

God of all mercy,
in this eucharist you have set aside our sins
and given us your healing:
grant that we who are made whole in Christ
may bring that healing to this broken world,
in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.



Commission & Benediction

So now we leave this space of worship
And while so much of the road ahead is uncertain,
the path constantly changing,
we know some things that are as solid and sure
as the ground beneath our feet,
and the sky above our heads.

We know God is love.
We know Christ's light endures.

We know the Holy Spirit is there,
found in the space between all things,
closer to us than our next breath,
binding us to each other,
until we meet we again,

Go in peace.

(Rev. Nora Vedress, Calvary United Church in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, Canada.)

Closing Hymn

'Eternal Ruler of the ceaseless round.'

Just the words are on the screen. Verse 2 is omitted in the singing. Sung by St Bartholomew's Schola, members of an Anglican church community based in Seattle, USA.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ka8baGQh-24&t=57s>

