

Does God fight your battles?

Diocesan Sermon for 25th August 2024

1 Kings 8:22-30,41-33; Psalm 84; Eph 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

Father God, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

The expression we hear is that no one really knows what someone is truly experiencing. We can never realistically walk in someone else's shoes. Both are true in the literal sense, from a human perspective, because we all come from different beginnings, are raised by different people, and our genetic makeup and methods we use to deal with a given situation are many and varied. We may conclude that no one understands us and what we are experiencing, but we would be wrong. God sent Jesus, to be born to a human couple, and therefore shares our DNA makeup. Jesus in his human form was subject to every emotion, thought, feeling that we experience, with the difference that he did not sin as a result, like we quite often do. God orchestrated this to fully understand what we experience and how we respond. Solomon could not comprehend that God would leave his heavenly home to dwell on earth with man, but he knows that God is faithful and will listen to his people and forgive them. He also knows that God desires to bless all the nations of the earth through his chosen people, the Israelites, with his mighty and out-stretched arm.

As our psalmist says, it is better to spend one day with God, than a thousand without. To be a doorkeeper, the lowliest attendant in the temple, than to spend time with those who do not honour God. People who visited the great temple came to experience the joy of worshipping in God's house, just as we should today in the buildings and places where we come to worship. The Israelites offered sacrifices at the temple to receive God's favour, protection, and bounty. We should do the same today, a sacrifice of praise, trusting God and taking refuge in him. As Solomon goes on to instruct, 'when famine or plague comes to the land, or blight or mildew, locusts or grasshoppers, or when an enemy besieges in any of our cities, whatever disaster or disease may come, and when a prayer or plea is made by anyone' among you....then lift your hands toward God and he will hear from heaven, forgive and **act**, and deal with everyone for all that they do according to their hearts. Wow, God knows everyone's' hearts, he hears our pleas and **acts** on our behalf.

In our gospel reading from John, Jesus was preaching in the synagogue, that he was sent to earth. God provided this bread from heaven. Not just the manna that the emancipated Israelites ate, and not just the five loaves and two fish that many of them had just shared in, but the living bread that will allow them to live forever.

Many of his followers were expecting a Messiah who would feed their bellies and liberate their nation from Roman rule, found this teaching very hard to accept. Many were offended by Jesus' claims and abhorred by his suggestion of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. Jesus was talking about giving his body up to be sacrificed for all, and the shedding of his blood as a redemption for our sin. It is an image of what faith in God requires. As Augustine, a fourth century philosopher and theologian described it, 'believe and you have eaten'. Jesus goes on to say that no one can come to the Father, except by him. When he says this many stop following him because they do not understand, nor want to. They want to choose their own path. Jesus asks the twelve disciples if they wish to leave him as well. Peter with the Holy Spirit speaking through him says, to whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life, and you are the Holy One of God.

Is this what we say when people ask us today? We are amidst a world in turmoil: Ukraine and Russia; Israel and Palestine; numerous civil unrests and natural disasters displacing and leaving people homeless; many living below the poverty line; the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. Where is God in all of this? Are these the powers and principalities that Paul is speaking of in our Ephesians reading? Jesus speaks of wanting peace for us and this is achieved through breaking down the walls of inequality and racism. But then the powers of hell sow seeds of sin and discord, whisper untruths in our ears, spreading rumours that others are being treated better than us, receiving the bigger share, and that's just not fair, is it? We all wish we could spend our lives in undisturbed tranquillity, in the company of our friends and family, and in the fellowship of God's people. But, as Christians, we know that the devil will not let this happen. We can throw our hands up and say 'it's all too hard', and 'if you can't beat them, join them', and live in apathy. But we know this will not solve any problem, and we know, if we are honest, we cannot do it on our own.

As children of God, we need to be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. We need to make the conscious decision to daily clothe ourselves in the armour of God, as we face the battlelines drawn for us in today's world. According to Paul, as God's soldiers there are six things that comprise the armour of God. Five are defensive and only one is powerful and offensive, and all is gilded in prayer.

The belt of truth: a soldier used his belt to gather his tunic and hold his sword, giving him a sense of confidence and strength. Paul speaks of the revelation of God through Jesus and through scripture that is the spiritual truth that will expose and dispel the devil's lies; and the inward truth, that a Christian should be above reproach, they must always be honest and truthful.

The breastplate of righteousness; a breastplate over the back and front of the soldier, covering his vital organs. To be clothed in righteousness is to be right with God; to be justified by his grace through Jesus' sacrifice, to stand before God, not condemned but accepted, protected from the devil's false accusations.

Gospel boots are shoes for your feet to proclaim the gospel of peace. For the Romans these were probably half-boots made of leather, that left the toes free, had heavy studded soles, and were tied to the ankles and shins with ornamental straps. They were ideal for long marches, standing for long periods, and preventing the foot from sliding. We need to have a firm footing to proclaim the gospel. We need to be sure of what we believe and proclaim it.

The shield of faith: This was not the small, round shield, it was the long oblong one that measured 1200 x 750mm, 4 x 2 ½ feet. It was two layers of wood glued together, covered with linen and then animal hide, and bound with iron above and below. This shield was used to put out the flames of arrows dipped in pitch and set alight. Paul used this analogy to put out the flaming arrows of the evil one. These are the thoughts of doubt and disobedience, rebellion, lust, malice, or fear. God is our shield for those who choose to find refuge in him.

The helmet of salvation: This is the Christian's hope of salvation, assurance of future and final salvation, because we have already received God's forgiveness. The Roman helmet was made of bronze or iron and had a lining of felt or sponge to make the weight bearable. Nothing short of an axe or hammer could penetrate it, and in some cases, they had a hinged visor, and were decorated with feathered plumes and crests. A Christian's helmet enables them to hold up their head with confidence and joy in the knowledge that they have been saved.

The sixth piece of armour is the sword of Spirit. This is the one for attack as well as defence. It is described as the word of God, scripture, God's written word, inspired by the Holy Spirit, used to cut through people's defences, to prick their consciences and to stab them spiritually awake. God's word is sharper than any two-edged sword and we must never be ashamed to use it.

The final piece of armour is not what you would find in the Roman armour, but it is the most powerful, for it passes through any armour, it is prayer. It should be our first line of defence and uttered with our last breath. As Paul instructs, we should pray in the Spirit, being prompted, and guided by him. We should pray for ourselves and for each other. It is not through man's own words and actions that this world will finally be brought to peace, it will be through our faith in an awesome God who loves us, hears us, forgives us, and **acts** on our behalf.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.