

“The Armour of God”: sermon on Sunday 26th August 2018 by The Reverend Canon David Hodgson at All Saints Church Wokingham

Reading: Ephesians 6: 10 -20

This morning I’m going to focus on the first of our two bible readings. It’s from the Letter to the Ephesians. I won’t waste time with the debates about whether it was really written by the Apostle Paul or not. These have their place in university seminars, but the reality is that the letter is included as holy scripture, in the canon of the New Testament and is revered by the church as true to the faith of Christ. Let’s spend time on hearing and interpreting what it says.

The Letter to the Ephesians has two halves really – the first half tells of the wonderful plan and purposes of God; which God has carried out in Jesus Christ; which is to bring all people together at one with God, living in unity and peace through the love of Christ. It contains awesome verses often quoted such as:

2:8 “for by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God”

and 3:17 “I pray that... Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; as you are being rooted and grounded in love.”

The second half of the Letter is a plea to its readers to lead a life worthy of this high calling – a life characterised by that unity and that peace which Christ has won for us and into which we have been incorporated by baptism.

The Letter gives examples of how to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace - in the church community - in the family - and in the wider community. There is much focus on what we say and how we speak to one another “that your words may give grace to those who hear” 4:29. It is about being like Christ. Predominantly the message is about treating others with kindness. “be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.” What we say and do must be helpful and constructive not destructive or harmful to others.

We shouldn't get too stuck on the fact that the Letter to the Ephesians does not condemn slavery as a system outright. This was 2000 years ago remember! I think of it like this – Christians writing nowadays might want to tell employees and managers to treat each other with respect, to work well as employees and to manage well as managers. But imagine how things might be 500 years into the future from now – I'm thinking it's quite likely that the very idea of anyone being anyone else's employee will be as abhorrent then as slavery is to us now; that a person should give up their rights over their time and their energies for another person for money, which you need anyway to live, and be subject to that person's direction!! How did earlier Christians put up with that or even think God was happy with it; Christians in the year 2518 could well be asking? If you're thinking – well society could never be that different surely even in 500 years' time – how could society run if no-body worked for anybody for money? – well that's at least the size of the imaginary leap the first Christians would have had to have taken I reckon to have condemned slavery outright in their day.

And a similar point could be made, if we had time, to interpret the approach the Letter takes to the relationship between husbands and wives. Certainly, the Letter’s assumptions about the role of men and women, or indeed the nature of marriage, should no more be

taken as normative for Christians today than its assumptions about slavery.

Whilst the Spirit of God we believe inspired the writers of Holy Scripture, the Spirit would not artificially lift them out of their time completely, else the message of salvation would not have been heard by their contemporaries at all.

But what The Letter to the Ephesians does do – is to set out the basic principle of respect for one another whatever our situation is in our prevailing society – because we are all servants together of the one God. And that of course fundamentally undercuts all pretensions of any society - whether back then, or now, or in the 25th century - to imagine that the different social status people have is of any final importance in God's eyes.

The final section of Ephesians we heard read today is this famous picture of the whole armour of God. It draws metaphorically on the image of a warrior equipped to fight and to withstand attack. We need to stand strong against attack - not in our own strength which is actually weak – but in God's strength and power - if we are to maintain and protect that way of life that should belong to the community of Christ– living with kindness and respect, living in unity and peace.

The real enemies, the Letter says are not people as such – not flesh and blood – but rather cosmic powers and spiritual forces. We do not have to accept the world-view of the ancients or embrace gothic fantasies to understand what this means. Human beings are captivated by destructive, harmful powers greater than ourselves, which either we fail to resist or react to in ways which only worsen the situation.

We have seen it in the great evils of our times – genocides, weapons of mass destruction, clandestine rendition and torture, apartheid, human trafficking, sexual abuse, terrorist atrocities, the wanton destruction of other species and the laying waste of precious ecological systems, the killing and wounding of innocent civilians in the name of security. John Steinbeck in his famous novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, set in the Great Depression in America when bank foreclosures were forcing tenant farmers out of work, captured this idea of powerful controlling forces he calls monsters which are bigger than the individuals in them:

“But the bank is only made of man. No, you’re wrong there—quite wrong there. The bank is something else than men. It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it. The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It’s the monster. Men made it, but they can’t control it.” [John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*](#).

One of the most influential modern interpreters of this section of Ephesians was the American activist, educator and professor of biblical studies, Walter Wink, who died in 2012. He interpreted the bible's symbolism of the spiritual forces of evil, in his books about the powers. These powers are the institutions, belief systems, traditions which are bigger than any one of us, into which we are often unconsciously socialized to accept as normality, and which can lead us to be blind to the injustices and evils they cause. In Wink's understanding all systems of power have the potential to be just or unjust, violent or nonviolent. “The Powers are good. The Powers are fallen. The Powers must be redeemed.” A contemporary American commentator on spirituality and modern society called Michael Edwards has said about Wink: “ His work helps us to understand how worldviews shape our perceptions of the issues that surround us, and how important it is that we revise our modern worldview if we want to move more effectively towards human wellbeing.”

The Letter to the Ephesians helps us to see as Walter Wink did that this struggle is not just a matter of a debate between differing ideas, or of a competition between different enterprises, this is a struggle – not a physical one and not between different groups of people – baddies and goodies, Christians and non-Christians - and not one which requires violence in return for violence – this is a spiritual struggle against forces like fear and greed; ignorance and cruelty; lust for power and domination. These powers have to be resisted in God's strength and the defences are spiritual defences – truthfulness, righteousness (or justice), proclaiming the good news of peace, (or mission); faithfulness, and salvation. The only offensive rather than defensive item in the imagery of chapter 6 is the metaphorical sword, this is the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God. This is a Spirit-inspired message which changes hearts.

Finally, but not least, we are called to pray constantly and to support one another in prayer. Walter Wink put the importance of prayer in this reading very nicely when he wrote:

“the struggle against evil can make us evil, and no amount of good intentions automatically prevents it happening. The whole armour of God that Ephesians 6:10-20 counsels us to put on is crafted specifically to protect us against that contagion of evil within our own souls, and its metals are all forged in prayer.”

We might say that these matters are all above our heads – surely these great powers do not reach into our lives – but I think that is short-sighted – we all have choices to make about how we respond to others, what we say, how we use our gifts, time, money – are we building up the sphere of unity and peace in our families, workplaces, church, communities as Christ calls us to do?

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