

Sermon Aug 26, 2018 The Armour of God

I've always loved the images we see in the stained glass windows found in almost all Anglican churches. I love the richness of their contrasting colours. The way the light shines through the glass and makes the figures glow with extra vividness throughout the church. There is also the vividness of the images themselves. The windows are all full of apostles and angels, crosses and halos, dragons and warrior saints. There is a gothic quality, a romantic, otherworldly quality to these images. For me this was very much heightened by the experience of a worshipping every Sunday throughout my childhood in a gothic cathedral built of stone, complete with towering pillars, galleries, and rose windows. The iconography of that experience was very much of christianity as a noble pursuit, like jousting, or boar hunting - something carried on from the days of chivalry. Something perfectly compatible with wearing a suit of armour and wielding a sword.

The letter to the Ephesians very much adds to that picture in this passage from its last chapter that we heard this morning. The writer paints a very dramatic portrait of the christian life as part of a cosmic battle between good and evil. He bids us "put on the whole armour of God... 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.”

To help us fight the wily foe who leads this crusade of darkness he describes a full arsenal of holy armour that each of us should wear in this cosmic campaign:

The belt of truth around our waists

The breastplate of righteousness.

For shoes, the gospel of peace

The shield of faith - to quench the flaming arrows of the evil one

The helmet of salvation

The sword of the Spirit - which is the word of God.

Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, the Spirit, the word of God. A whole suit of armour. It is imagery, a language, which was undoubtedly familiar to his readers, surrounded as they likely were by Rome's ever present legions of armed men.

He does not mean, of course, to speak literally. He does not mean to encourage Christians to take up arms, literally, in the name of Christ, although there can be no doubt that a literal interpretation

of these phrases must have been acted upon countless times, by countless fervent crusaders of the cross. On the contrary, the writer of Ephesians writes metaphorically, symbolically. He means that we should put truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, the Spirit, the word of God in place of weapons. That instead of actual military armour we should use this 'armour of God' to live in such a way with each other that the other kind of armour becomes completely unnecessary and is abandoned. By saying that the conflict Christians face is not about 'flesh and blood' but is rather against 'cosmic powers' in 'heavenly places, I think he means to speak about the depth and importance of the struggle, about the power of spiritual means in a material world. He also means to empathize with his readers and hearers, who very likely faced real persecution and felt quite literally embattled.

But the question is, where are we now? Where is our struggle now? Does it help us to think of the struggle as being not with the here and now of flesh and blood but against cosmic power of darkness in heavenly places? I'm not sure it does, although numerous epics continue to place the conflict between good and evil in a cosmic context: Star Trek, Star Wars, numerous Super Heroes, the second instalment of The Incredibles, you name it. They are more popular than ever and they all centre on this same

epic conflict between good and evil, which is - apparently - eternal.

But if we look closely at them, they actually locate the struggle quite differently than does the writer of Ephesians. Their battles may be intergalactic and may take place at warp speed in vast ships, in black holes, singularities, and superclusters, but the real struggle somehow always ends up being much closer to home, in the flesh and blood AND spiritual realm of the human heart. Captain Kirk, Captain Picard, Doctor Spock, Han Solo, Luke Skywalker, Ensign Crusher, Princess Leia, Bones, and Scotty all end up, in the end, with a change of heart. That's what makes all the difference, in the end, and in fact throughout. Whether the struggle is with Romulans, Klingons, the Screen Slaver, or what have you, the real transformation always takes place really, in their own hearts. The real actions they find themselves compelled to take in light of the change are almost always on their own ship, among their own communities. Whether they are aboard the Starship Enterprise or the Millennium Falcon, these communities, these families, turn out to be very much of flesh and blood and spirit. No matter how boldly they purport to be going where no one has gone before, they always end up, somehow, here at home among human beings. I suspect that something similar may

have turned out often to be true for the cosmic crusaders among the Ephesians. I'm inclined to think that's why the word took flesh. To be here, where the need is greatest, among us human beings, who are of flesh and blood and spirit.

As I grew older, I began to notice that the stained glass windows were not just about the saints and angels of a far time. That their vision was not *only* of the far off heavenly realms. I began to notice more and more that the names printed on the glass were the loved ones of people I knew, people who sat beside me in the pew or the choir stall. The struggle turned out to be more personal, more local, closer at hand than first I thought. Perhaps something similar happened for the people of Ephesus.

Though the writer of the letter to the Ephesians urges them to see their struggle as cosmic in nature and taking place in far off heavenly realms, it's possible that their most telling actions were in their own hearts and among the people of the flesh and blood families and communities right there in Ephesus, or wherever they found themselves.

It's likely that when they did that, they found that along with the shining armour recommended by the writer, some additional accoutrements were needed:

That they could not wear the belt of truth without loops and loops of mercy and compassion for instance. That the breastplate of righteousness rang false and empty if it was not tempered with humility and the heart it protected not practiced in filled with forgiveness. Perhaps they found that the helmet of salvation was simply too small a thing and would not fit at all unless the head of the wearer turned to prayer, self-examination, and repentance. And so on.

I've never worn a suit of armour (though I admit I've always wanted to) but I can imagine there might be a peculiar kind of solitude inside one of those things. You'd be all alone in there after all - well, almost. Perhaps in that darkness, in a quiet moment with visors down, one or two of the Ephesians were able to hear a knocking. Amidst the clanking and creaking and buffets of the endless battles going on around them, a persistent knocking at the door of the heart – as in the vision of Holman hunt given to us by the founders in *that* window there, above the high altar.

Perhaps eventually they found that what they needed was not armour at all since armour, if it actually does provide strength, only strengthens the visible exterior. Perhaps they found they that in their unprotected flesh and blood and spirit, were stronger than knew. Perhaps they found *that* was more truthful, faithful, peaceful. Perhaps *that's* what saved them. Perhaps they found that a more inward change was called for - first of all a change of heart, and after that a completely different kind of action.