

St Brandon's, Sermon for Sunday, 22nd August 2021.

Ephesians 6:10-20, John 6:56-59

Equipped, inside and out

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We tend to be a bit unsure nowadays how to speak about spiritual warfare, about Satan, about the devil, and evil spirits.

We reduce it to the stuff of halloween and huija boards.

To comical red devils with forks in their hands and pointed tails.

To witchcraft and satanic dealings.

We are a bit embarrassed by the language of Jesus healing those with unclean spirits and wonder about the place of a modern understanding of mental health.

Yet, even if we are unsure how to define evil, or know when appropriately to name something as evil, we nonetheless ask our baptism candidates "*Do you reject evil?*"

And when the sign of the cross is drawn on the candidate's forehead, we urge "*Stand bravely with Christ against all the powers of evil, and remain faithful to Christ to the end of your life.*"

And we intuitively know what we are meaning, even if we cannot comfortably reiterate it the moment the service is over!

We intuitively recognise the reality of the powers of darkness and evil as set against the powers of light and love. We hang on to the promise and surety that "*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*"

We may not use the term 'spiritual warfare', yet we recognise the symptoms:

the tendency for greed and power to corrupt at all levels, unwholesome desires in ourselves - where does it all start from? What is that corrupting force that prowls around looking to turn the heads and gain control?

These are all variations on the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness, overcoming the devil.

But the fight goes on, Jesus demonstrated the ultimate power of God in the resurrection, power over death and corruption but it has yet to be fully worked through, and we are caught up in this fight.

Paul talks about the wiles of the devil, of our struggle not being against enemies of blood and flesh – not merely blood and flesh - but driven by the forces of evil. To stand firm against the forces of evil, we need a greater strength than our mere flesh and blood abilities: we need the strength from God, the strength **of** God.

Paul entreats the Christians he is addressing to realise that they are equipped by God with many resources, they are equipped so they can stand firm against the devil, resisting the temptations and remaining faithful to Christ to the end of their lives.

They are equipped by God to stand alongside each other and on-side with God in the battle against the forces of evil, they are given the armour and weapons for the fight.

A very particular sort of fight that rests on the 'weapons' of virtues.

Virtues of truthfulness, righteousness and justice; on living out the peace produced by the gospel: peace, God's peace as a weapon against the evil one.

We are given the sword of the spirit that is the Word of God, that gift of the spirit that enabled clumsy Peter to become articulate when faced with the hostile crowds in the stories of the Acts of the apostles, the gift of the spirit helping us form our words and prompting us.

We are given the 'weapons' of prayer to stand together, across nations and when we are apart, in encouragement and in praying protection from the evil one, praying against the forces of darkness.

Stand firm, says Paul, three times he says this. We are so easily knocked over by the trickery of the evil one. Preaching on an earlier Ephesians passage, Sue talked about the devil getting a foothold, using the smallest cracks and crevices where we are careless about our adherence to Jesus' teaching.

Subtlety, seduction, cunning, all the wiles of the devil: you are equipped, stay faithful!

But of course we fail, sometimes in big ways, often in small ways; the bible tells us of many who fail but perhaps the most notorious was Judas.

Listen again to the way it is described in John chapter 13, which is the story of the last supper as told by John, it starts:

'Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him.'

After he has washed their feet, Jesus declares one of them will betray him:

"It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him.'

Every Eucharist we re-tell the story of the last supper, the version in Matthew, Luke and Mark, and every time, we remember Judas' betrayal as part of the prayer that blesses the bread: we say *"On the night that he was betrayed ..."*

This fight to stand firm against the devil is central; every time, as preparation for receiving the bread, we are reminded that Judas accepted a different bread, the bread that pointed to him being under the influence of Satan.

We can slip and slide into that way, and would live entirely in the shadow of that fact were it not for the saving action of Jesus.

He takes the bread, breaks it and gives it to us saying *"Take, eat, this is my body which is given for you ... drink this, all of you, this is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins ..."*

Jesus takes the blood that should have been on our hands and leaves our hands newly clean: over and over again, he draws us back to himself in this central and powerful sacrament of the Eucharist.

For the fight against the cosmic powers, we are not only equipped with the armour of God, we are equipped with the Eucharist as the memorial and entry point into Christ's covenant of forgiveness.

But the Eucharist is so much more: we hear in the passage Richard read for us from John 6, Jesus stating that the bread he will give us is his flesh for the life of the world.

"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them ... whoever eats me will live because of me" : the living bread that came down from heaven bringing eternal life.

The Eucharist is the food that nourishes that life that the father shares with the Son, and the Son shares with us. Shares it through his own body, given for us.

It is part of a mystery beyond my grasp that the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, then accepted betrayal and death through the intervention of the evil one, only to reverse everything and become the flesh and blood we need to feed on, to strengthen us for that fight against and ultimate triumph over, the evil one.

Jesus, who was never merely flesh and blood, instituted a means of us continuing to be physically nourished and spiritually built with that, not merely flesh and blood body.

His flesh and blood become spiritual food and drink to build and equip us, *"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."*

Heavenly, spiritual food for the spiritual fight.

This is the food we need to strengthen us and help us wear lightly, that suit of armour.

Let us not underestimate the reality of either the powers of darkness nor the powers of the bread of life, if we are to abide always in the power of God.

Amen