

Introduction

This afternoon I will be baptising a little girl at Fowlmere. This has been delayed because of the pandemic and it is clearly important to her parents that she should be baptised. When I prepare parents for their children's baptism we think a lot about the meaning of the words of the service and the commitment they are making on their children's behalf. For all sorts of reasons I think the Baptism service is a wonderful service, probably because it is setting the tone for a life of commitment to Jesus.

The words used after the priest signs the child with the cross are really interesting. They say;

Do not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified.

The congregation respond

**Fight valiantly as a disciple of Christ
against sin, the world and the devil,
and remain faithful to Christ to the end of your life.**

And the priest prays for God's protection for the child.

May almighty God deliver you from the powers of darkness,
restore in you the image of his glory,
and lead you in the light and obedience of Christ.

Amen.

It may seem incongruous to begin their Christian lives by encouraging a new Christian or baby to fight. But it is stating a vital truth of the Christian life. We are in a battle and it is important for us not to forget it.

In my twenties I worshipped at All Souls', Langham Place in London where John Stott the famous writer and theologian was Rector. At invitation services where people had brought their friends to hear the Christian message and where he had invited people to make a commitment to Jesus he used to ask them come forward at the end of the service and he'd say this, "It won't be easy because everyone else will be going in the opposite direction to you. But you may as well start now because as a Christian you will find yourself going in the opposite direction all your life.

Being a Christian is not easy. Beneath surface appearances an unseen battle is raging and it is a battle against the powers of darkness who are doing their best to undermine God's Kingdom. Paul has been talking to the Ephesian Christians about the new Kingdom or society that God is building and he ends on a warning note.

Ephesians:6:10-20

John 6:56-69

Is it God's plan to build a new society? Then the powers of darkness will do their best to destroy it.

Has God through Jesus broken down the walls dividing human beings of different races and cultures from each other? Then the devil and God's enemies will try to rebuild them.

Does God intend his reconciled and redeemed people to live together in harmony and purity? Then the powers of hell will scatter amongst them the seeds of discord and sin.

It is with these powers that Paul tells us we are to wage war - or more accurately to wrestle.

Our struggle is not with human beings but with cosmic intelligences, our enemies aren't human but demonic. Paul tells us that the forces ranged against us as Christians are:

- Powerful - they wield power and authority.
- Wicked - our spiritual enemies use their power destructively rather than constructively, for evil not for good
- Cunning - Paul talks about "the wiles of the devil" or his cunning schemes"

I think that as Christians, we are prone to make one of two mistakes. We either, dwell upon the devil and his power in our lives and blame everything that goes wrong on him, or we ignore him and forget we have an opponent who is set on damaging our relationship with God.

In my previous church not long before I left we bought a wonderful new sound system which was delivered to the church when none of us had time to unpack it and set it up. My plan was to wait, set it up during the week and work out how to use it before we used it in worship on a Sunday morning. The church wardens wanted to use it straight away. The result was a very fraught hour on Sunday morning where we found we didn't have all the connections needed, we didn't understand the instructions, tempers got very frayed and the atmosphere was not conducive to worship. One of the wardens said to me afterwards, "Wow! The devil really got at us there." My thought was 'well I guess you

could blame the devil for a bad choice but what happened there wasn't a demonic attack it was the result of an unwise decision.'

On the other hand there have been times in my personal life and in my ministry when everything has seemed to go badly and it suddenly feels as if I am under attack. When I have taken the time to step back I have

Ephesians:6:10-20

John 6:56-69

seen that the devil has been trying to undermine me and turning to God for support and help has transformed everything. It is a fine line to walk. We don't need to look for demons under every bed but equally we must remember that there is a war on.

Paul encourages us to work in partnership with God. He says, "Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power **and** put on the whole armour of God that you might be able to stand. So we are to be strong but we are to use the resources that God gives us for the battle.

These resources are 'forged and furnished' by God. In the Old Testament it is God himself who is depicted as a warrior fighting to vindicate his people but here the armour and weapons are his but he shares them with us. We have to put on the armour, take up the weapons and go to war with the powers of evil.

As he writes, Paul is in prison, chained to a Roman soldier, so it is no surprise that he uses the armour of a Roman soldier to describe the protection and weapons that God has given us so that we can take our stand against the devil's schemes to undermine our Christian lives

The belt secured the soldier's tunic around his waist and it was from the belt that his sword hung. The belt gave the soldier freedom of movement. Paul likens truth to a soldier's belt. Others may guess and grope but the Christian moves freely and easily because they know the truth.

The breastplate covers the vital organs of the body, the heart and lungs. When someone is clothed in righteousness they are impregnable. Words are no defence against accusations and slander but a good life is.

Sandals are the sign of one equipped and ready to move. As I leave the house the last thing I usually do is to put my shoes on. The sign of a Christian is that they are eager to be on the way to share the gospel with others who have not heard it.

The shield described here is not a small round shield but the great oblong one which the heavily armed warrior wore. In the times when Paul wrote one of the most dangerous weapons used in warfare was the fiery dart, a dart soaked in pitch and set alight which could cause horrible injury. The shield was made of a double piece of wood and when presented to the dart the dart sunk into the wood and the flame was extinguished. The devil is adept at firing fiery darts that undermine our faith and confidence in God, that lead us away from the straight path that God wants us to tread. Faith can deal with temptation and with doubts and fears. With Paul faith is always complete trust in Jesus. When we walk close with Christ we are safe from temptation and doubt.

The helmet protects our heads, our brains and Paul describes the helmet of salvation which transforms our thinking. Salvation doesn't only look back. It gives us forgiveness for the sins of the past and strength to conquer sin in the days to come.

The sword is the only piece of armour described by Paul which can be used for attack as well as for defence. The word of God is at once our weapon of defence against sin and our weapon of attack against the sins of the world

And, finally, the greatest weapon of all is prayer. Paul tells us three things about how we should be praying as we engage with the enemy

Our prayer must be constant

Our tendency is so often only to pray when we need help. Prayer is the basis of our relationship with God and it is from daily prayer that we find daily strength.

It must be intense

Limp prayer never got anyone anywhere. Prayer demands the concentration of every faculty upon God. It is as we look to God and engage with him that we meet with him and receive his strength and help

It must be unselfish

We are called to pray as much with others and for others as for ourselves. Often when we are ill or in trouble we find it very difficult to pray for ourselves. It is then that we need others to pray for us. Paul knows this and he knows, in his current situation, a prisoner in chains, awaiting a sentence of death that he needs

prayer more than ever. But what he asks for is not that he should escape death or imprisonment but that he will be given the opportunity to speak of his faith to those he meets. That he will have the courage to fearlessly preach the gospel.

So Paul ends his letter to this group of Christians that are very dear to his heart. He has told them the wonderful calling they have in Jesus, how they are called to live and to think and having warned them that they face a battle, and has reassured them that God is with them and has all the resources to help them in their battle