

**Ephesians 6.10-24**

Be strong... in the Lord

Stockton Parish Church

Sunday 23 November 2008

Well, we've come to the end of our series going through Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus. The end to Ephesians is rather sobering, after the breathless dash through Christian life and truth in the previous five chapters. Living the Christian life worthy of our calling, growing with one another, trusting in God's purposes, in what Jesus achieved for us on the cross—these things are easy to say. But all Christians know that it is far harder to put them into practice.

But why? Why is it so hard to put God first in everything?

Why is it so hard to love one another, to be united, to be one?

Why is it so hard to put worldly ways behind us, to live as God intended?

Why is it so hard to trust in God's plan for all of creation, his individual plan for each one of us?

## The devil's schemes

The reason it is hard to live for God, is that there are forces of evil at work in the world, not simply forces for good. And those forces of evil will do absolutely anything to disrupt God's work, to distract, discourage and dishearten God's children, hoping that they will turn away from their Father.

I wonder: do you believe in the devil as a personal being? Do you believe that there is a particular angel, called Lucifer, who opposed God in heaven, and now opposes him on earth? Because the Bible tells us that the devil is real, that he has a number of allies, dangerous weapons, and lots of experience.

CS Lewis, who wrote *The Chronicles of Narnia*, said there are two equal and opposite errors we can make about the devil. We can become obsessed by him, forgetting he is a beaten enemy; or we can ignore him, forgetting that he is still at large in the world, and able to inflict real damage.

We should have a *thorough knowledge*, and a *healthy respect* for our enemy, knowing that ultimately God wins the victory.

On Wednesday morning Alan gave the example of General Montgomery, who fought for the Allies in the Second World War. He fought against Field-Marshal Rommel, of the German army. He studied his personality, his weaknesses, and his tactics in previous battles, and planned his campaign carefully to exploit Rommel's weaknesses. Because of his respect for Rommel, and his thorough knowledge of his opponent, Montgomery was able to help turn the tide of the war against the Nazis, and help us to victory.

So what does Paul tell us here about the devil? First, he and his allies exercise considerable power, they are the 'rulers', 'authorities', the 'powers of this dark world', 'spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.' The devil is able to influence global events. The wars of the last century are evidence enough of that, as is the current economic crisis.

Second, the devil is wicked. He is evil, he opposed Jesus when Jesus lived among us; he will and does oppose us now. God is light and life; the devil wants darkness and death. God gives things order; the devil wants to reduce them to chaos.

Third, the devil is cunning. Paul says we must take our stand against the devil's 'schemes', or 'tactics'. For all his power, he rarely comes out in the open, preferring to disguise himself as an angel of light, a wolf in the sheep pen disguised as a sheep. Persecution and temptation are not his only weapons—he prefers to seduce and trick us into sin, compromise and error.

Have you ever read the French writer Charles Baudelaire? No? I haven't either!—but you may have seen the film *The Usual Suspects*? It ends with the line, 'The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he doesn't exist.'

The powers of darkness are powerful, wicked and cunning.

### **Be strong... in his might**

Against such an experienced, unseen enemy, what are we to do? How can we withstand these spiritual forces of evil? One of my favourite Christian writers, John Stott, says this:

Only the power of God can defend and deliver us from the might, the evil and the craft of the devil. True, the

principalities and powers are strong, but the power of God is stronger. It is his power which raised Jesus Christ from the dead and enthroned him in the heavenly places, and which has raised us from the death of sin and enthroned us with Christ. (Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, p.266)

Paul gives two commands right at the beginning of this passage. In v10 he says, 'be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.' In v11 he says, 'put on the full armour of God.' There is an important biblical balance between God's power, which enables us to defeat the powers of darkness, and our co-operation. It is God's armour but *we must put it on*.

If we trust in God's power, if we put on his armour and fight in his strength, there is no doubt who will win, and who will lose. The devil has already lost. He threw everything he had at Jesus on the cross. But Jesus took it all, and rose from the dead: God's strength is far greater than all the devil's power.

The devil's most powerful weapon—death—couldn't even hold Jesus for 48 hours! For us, the devil is a formidable opponent. But not for the Almighty God.

When we fight with God's armour, with God's weapons, the devil doesn't stand a chance, while we stand firm. In the space of a few verses, Paul tells us that with God's strength we can '*stand* against the schemes of the devil... *stand* our ground... *stand* firm.' Wobbly Christians are easy prey.

I don't know if you've ever been on a ship at sea when it gets really choppy. The waves are strong and powerful, the hull creaks and groans as it is battered by the weather. But if the hull is well made and strong, it can withstand the onslaught. It is the same with us—only God's armour is strong enough.

### **Put on... God's armour**

In v14-16 Paul lists the six main items of a Roman soldier's armour: belt, breastplate, boots, shield, helmet and sword. Of these, only the sword can be used for attack as well as defence.

First, then, Paul says: 'Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist.' The belt gathered a soldier's tunic together under his armour, so he was unimpeded while

marching and fighting. Buckling, or tightening the belt of truth around our waist means making sure we know what God teaches us in the Bible, and it means living with integrity. In other words, it means putting God's truth into practice, so it is more than something we know, it is the way we live.

Second: 'Stand firm... with the breastplate of righteousness in place.' If we believe and trust in Jesus, God takes Jesus' perfect life, and treats us as if we lived it ourselves! We are not condemned but accepted by God, because of Jesus' death and resurrection. So, when the devil accuses us, shouting, 'sinner', with our breastplate of righteousness in place we turn and say: 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.' Jesus died for our sins, so the devil's lies have no effect.

When God declares that we are perfect before him, he also begins to transform us from the inside-out. Our character grows in integrity, so that we start to live more and more like Jesus. So the breastplate of righteousness is both the status we have before God, and the new life we lead with his help.

Third: 'stand firm... with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.' Roman soldiers' boots were half-boot, half-sandal. They had no toe-caps, but solid soles, so the soldiers were mobile, but also had a sure footing. Being always ready to share our faith with others means we are always on the front foot. Sharing our faith not only introduces others to our Lord, it also stabilizes our own lives, reminding us of who we are before God.

Fourth: 'stand firm... take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.' The enemy will fling difficulty, persecution, temptation, false guilt, disobedience, fear in our path. But our full-size, iron-bound, linen-coated, water-soaked shield of faith extinguishes all these flaming arrows. Faith means laying hold of God's promises and using the gifts he has given us. It means stepping out, trusting in his strength, believing his word.

Fifth: 'stand firm... take the helmet of salvation.' As we have said, we have been saved, rescued from death, the ultimate enemy, by Jesus dying for us. Only this, only God's salvation

can ultimately protect us from the devil. The Roman helmet was made of a tough metal like bronze or iron, sometimes with a hinged visor for extra protection. There is nothing the devil can do that can break through the helmet of salvation, because Jesus has already won it for us!

So, then, we have a belt, breastplate, boots, shield and helmet. The final piece of God's armour is the sword: 'stand firm... take up... the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.' The word for 'sword' is *machaira*, which was a short sword, easy to wield in close combat. Remember Paul says we 'wrestle' against the devil and his allies. The battle is close, but we are well-equipped if we put on God's armour.

Hebrews 4.12 tells us that the word of God is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword. The Bible is given its cutting edge by the Holy Spirit, as we use it to parry the devil's attacks, as well as to strike back taking and reclaiming territory for God's kingdom. Jesus used Scripture to repel the devil, both when he was tempted in the wilderness, and throughout his ministry.

Reading the Bible, learning it and digesting it, builds up our faith, teaches us the truth, assures us of our righteousness and salvation, helps us to communicate the gospel of peace. The Bible is the sword, but it also helps us with the rest of God's armour, shoring up our confidence in God's strength.

## **Pray in the Spirit**

So how should we engage in battle? Paul says in v18-19:

18 And pray in the Spirit on *all* occasions with *all* kinds of prayers and requests. 19 With this in mind, be alert and *always* keep on praying for *all* the Lord's people.

Four times Paul says 'all': all occasions, all kinds of prayer, all the time, all God's people. Prayer should be part of every area of our life as individuals, and as a church. It embodies the balance we've been talking about: it shows that we are relying on God's strength, and that we are co-operating with him.

Prayer should lead to action: Paul asks the Ephesians to pray for him to carry out his ministry, to share his faith clearly and

without fear. We pray before, during and after engaging in battle. If we don't, we're fighting in our own strength.

The Spirit gives two weapons: the Bible, and prayer. If we are to make inroads in Stockton for God's kingdom, we must devote ourselves to both. Look around you. Can you see any Bibles? No? This church doesn't have any. At our last PCC meeting we discussed buying 60 Bibles. It's expensive, but without it, Christians are impotent, unable to fight back. The day after we talked about it in PCC, we were given £124—enough for 15 Bibles. Money is not a problem for God.

On Wednesday two weeks ago we had a church prayer meeting. Other than myself and Alan, there were only two members of the congregation there. Now, I know some had good reason not to be there. I'm not interested in that. But I am asking: is prayer a priority for us all in this church?

What do you think the devil says when he sees a church without any Bibles, full of people who don't pray? It's simple: 'Job done.' Well he hasn't beaten Stockton Parish Church, and he won't. The fight will be tough, but *we will win*.

## **Peace through undying Love**

The devil is working to frustrate God's plans. But on the cross God won the victory in Jesus. Lots of people explain it like this. On 6 June 1944 the Allies landed on the beaches at Normandy. Nearly 200,000 personnel were involved, 130,000 of them landing on the beaches. D-Day marked the decisive victory in the Second World War, as Europe was recaptured by the Allies. But it took nearly a year before final victory was announced, during which time many more soldiers died.

The cross was our D-Day. That is when the decisive victory was won by God. But the battle goes on, and it can still be fierce, and there will still be casualties. But, in the end, the victory belongs to God. We must be wary, but not worry. The devil doesn't stand a chance, if we stand firm with Jesus.

A friend of mine likes to say: 'I've read the end of the book... and the Lamb wins!' There will be peace, as Paul greets his friends with at the end of the letter. There will be peace, because of Jesus' undying love. The war will end with victory for Jesus: 'I've read the end of the book... and the Lamb wins!'