

August 23rd 2015 - Ephesians 6:10-20 ; John 6 56-69

Three weeks ago I found myself standing on a battlefield. A line of archers to my right released a volley of arrows which sailed over my head felling foot soldiers standing nearby. A horse thundered past striking blows at anyone in the way. My seven year old son couldn't bear to watch. I should add that I, and the rest of my family, were wearing 3D glasses at the time watching a film in the Bannockburn Information Centre. The film was stunning, we stood in the middle of the auditorium surrounded by life size images. I strongly recommend a visit if you are in the area. We recovered with a scone and some hot chocolate and proceeded up to Stirling Castle for more exploration and discovery. This is a snapshot of the Kilgours on holiday. This is how we choose to spend our leisure time. So, when I read today's passage, my first thought was "Armour! I know something about this."

Here are three things I know about armour;

- *You need the right equipment for the job.*
- *You need to look after it.*
- *It's often not very comfortable.*

To ensure that you have the correct equipment, you first need to know your enemy. As one family member put it, you might not feel confident in your chainmail if faced with a loaded shotgun. Paul tells us to be strong in the Lord and to stand against the forces of evil. He is not talking about worldly battles, such as the one at Bannockburn where which side you are on may depend on where you were born and allegiances can be made, broken and switched in an instant. Worldly battles are motivated by greed for land, resources, power and influence.

Paul is asking us to rise above personal motives and goals and become involved in the struggle between good and evil. He recognises that what is important is the spiritual life, calling to mind the words of Jesus in our gospel. "It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is useless." This is no simple task. the word "struggle" in our reading today is translated "wrestle" in the King James version. The same word used when Jacob wrestled with God before returning to visit his brother Esau whom he had cheated out of his inheritance. Such a struggle can be long and costly, Jacob limped for the rest of his life, but it is a necessary one if we want to be part of God's plan.

In 21st Century Henleaze our lives are rarely touched by military conflict, but we may encounter the forces of evil in ethical and moral situations. This is the kind of struggle I wish to address today.

Our understanding of what is right and wrong changes all the time, you need only consider the church's attitude to slavery or women to see this. A personal example of such a struggle was reported in the newspapers last weekend when a number of senior religious leaders including Lord Carey, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote an open letter in support of the Assisted Dying Bill. Lord Carey, has announced that he has changed his mind on this issue, no doubt after much "wrestling." His views do not conform to the official stance of the Church of England, and, for me,

raise new questions and open up possibilities for further debate and reflection on a subject where I thought I knew where I stood.

Other issues we might struggle with include

- the plight of refugees, migrants or the homeless*
- debt at personal, corporate and national level*
- environmental issues*
- freedom of speech and freedom to worship*

There are many others and each of you will have issues which you find particularly difficult. As we tackle them we may find ourselves questioning those in positions of authority, we may find ourselves standing against the secular way of thinking which associates success with financial gain or popularity.

God has provided equipment to help us in our struggle to make sense of the world. I may have no answers to these questions, but as we wrestle with them I believe that ultimately God's will will prevail.

Once we know what we are fighting, we need to know how to use our armour. There is much that can be said about how God equips us, here are a few observations.

Mainly armour is defensive. The breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation collectively allow us to draw close to God and shelter under his protection. Through salvation in Jesus, we achieve a right standing before God . Not the self righteousness of someone who believes himself always to be right, but the righteousness of God who has a balanced view of all and knows how each of us fits into his plan. We don't have to strive for this. it is given to all who believe.

A Roman shield is semicircular so that arrows and other missiles which strike it are deflected to the side. Through our faith in Jesus, we can identify ideas and lines of enquiry not relevant to our particular issue and these can be discarded. It struck me when I was reflecting on this passage that shields in particular work best when there are more than one. The Roman army famously adopted the testudo or tortoise formation when under fire. Soliders grouped together using shields for protection above them and on all sides like a tortoise shell. A modern example is riot police advancing in a line. We can develop and strengthen our faith by sharing it and by joining together for worship and in practical response to the needs of others.

Sometimes the best form of defence is attack. Paul urges us to take up the sword of the spirit which is the word of God. The bible can sometimes appear misleading and contradicting, it's meaning has been debated and discussed over many centuries, but with the help of the holy spirit it is a powerful tool in spreading God's message and seeking God's truth

Armour must also be practical. A belt is needed to hold everything together. There are certain truths which permeate all christian thinking, such as those contained in the 10

commandments or the beatitudes. Everything we say or do should be held together by this belt of truth. Any theory or idea which does not cannot be from God.

We should be ready to take our beliefs out into the world. There is no point in putting on armour if we intend to engage only with family and friends. We need to be ready to go wherever God requires. Where necessary we should adapt our language customs and traditions to engage with people where they are. There is evidence that Roman soldiers in Britain wore socks with their sandals, something that would not have been necessary in Palestine.

God has provided us with the best equipment for the job and the means to use it. It is up to us to care for it. Traditional armour had to be sharpened, oiled polished and nourished. The best way to clean chainmail is to put it into a barrel of sand and get your squire to take it to the top of a large hill and roll it down.

How can we look after the armour of God?

Paul's answer is prayer. Pray in the spirit about everything all the time. Be alert and therefore informed, so that you know what to pray for and you are able to discern the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Persevere so that you keep open the channel of communication between you and God. But a word of warning. Prayer can take you to places you don't want to go. Paul wrote this letter from prison, yet despite physical hardship he asks for prayers to be bold as he spreads God's message.

Armour is often not comfortable. It can be heavy and cumbersome. Spiritual armour can also take us out of our comfort zone. It is never easy to admit you have changed your mind about something as Lord Carey has done. Particularly if it brings you into disagreement with others you respect. Other struggles and debates bring challenges to our way of living, such as our attitude to giving, our carbon footprint or our tolerance for the views of those we disagree with.

800 years after the battle of Bannockburn there is still a debate about whether Scotland and England should be separate countries, but the world has changed. The battlefield has been replaced by hustings, the television screen and social media. In the war against terrorism we are protected through intelligence networks, sniffer dogs and CCTV. These themselves bring moral and ethical issues for us to wrestle with.

As you read the paper and watch the news this week I challenge you to take one of these difficult issues and wrestle with it. Maybe God has something to say to you. It is easy to walk away from difficult issues as some of Jesus' followers did when faced with things they found hard to accept but with perseverance and an open mind you may reach a deeper understanding.

However bewildering and complicated our world may seem as we hurtle through the 21st century. Remember God's armour remains the same. His perspective is eternal. His truths are always relevant and will never fail.

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