

25/08/2024 Ephesians 6:10-20

In this sermon I'll be dealing with three points
That come from today's reading.

The first point is that ***we are in a spiritual battle*** –

That we are, as flesh and blood people,
Engaged in a cosmic struggle.

The second point is that ***God equips us to stand our ground*** –

That God provides us with what we need to persevere
In the callings that he has given us,
In the places that he has put us to stand spiritual guard.

And the third point is that ***God works through our prayer*** –

That as we pray for each other and for those who speak God's word,
The mystery of the Gospel is revealed in our world.

Let's start at the beginning, with the first point:

We are in a spiritual battle.

Listen to what St Paul writes at the beginning of our reading:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 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.

Notice first of all that St Paul says that our strength

Comes from *God*: St Paul is reminding us

That when it comes to the life of faith we are involved in a struggle

That cannot be won by human strength or determination

Or commitment: it is God alone who can strengthen us

To stand against the wiles, or the craftiness and sly methods

Of the devil – of the one who wants to tear apart

What God is brought together.

As part of this teaching St Paul says something

That we need to keep hearing: **For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh,**

Let's pause here to think about this.

When we experience conflict with other people

It's natural for us to think that *they* are our enemy.

We naturally do not consider the deeper spiritual realities,

But focus on what other *people* have said and done,

And work ourselves up into anxiety and anger and bitterness.

But St Paul is saying that no human being is ultimately our enemy,

And that is because the real struggle is not between human beings,

But between the church of God and what St Paul calls the **rulers...**

authorities... the cosmic powers of this present darkness, [and]the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Now, St Paul doesn't spell out what these forces are,

But he assures us that if we go on the attack

Against our perceived human enemies, using human political tactics,

Then it won't work, that we will be drawn into darkness

Rather than living in the light of God.

Since we are in a spiritual battle,

Then we need to use spiritual weapons

To engage effectively in the struggle,

And this brings us to the second point:

God equips us to stand our ground.

Listen to what St Paul writes: **Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.**

First of all, notice how many times the word 'stand' is used.

One way to think about this, is to consider where God has placed you:

Are you a parent or child, a boss or worker, a citizen or resident?

God has placed you somewhere in life right now,

And as you consider the duties and responsibilities that you have,
God's word is first of all alerting you to the spiritual conflict
That you will face in the interactions that you have day to day,
And he is providing you with the spiritual armour you need
To stand your ground in the attacks that will come.

Now, St Paul doesn't go into detail into what it means
For truth to be a belt, or righteousness to be a breastplate,
Or faith to be a shield: we have these images that we can mediate on.
But for today let's briefly take one of the images,
And consider what it could mean for us
As we stand our ground in the spiritual struggle.

St Paul says we should fasten the belt of truth around our waist.
For an ancient soldier, the belt is the harness,
On which the armour hangs.

Perhaps think about the webbing that a modern soldier
Or police officer wears when they are on duty:
It keeps things in order and at hand.

Now, St Paul is saying, truth is part of the armour that God gives us
To stand our ground in the real struggle that we face.

Truth is part of the armour: *truth*, not to what is expedient,
Or what will win human approval, or what we find most congenial,
But what is true.

Think about human beings when they struggle against each other:
They accept weak and absurd arguments for their own side;
They tell half-truths or outright lies against their opponents;
They don't worry about what is true as long as they win.
That may appear to be an effective strategy in fighting human beings,
But it's useless in the real, spiritual struggle.

We fasten the belt of truth when we determine to accept
Only that which we know before God is true:
When we, before our Lord, say to him
Not what other people would like to be true
Or what we'd like to be true,

But what *his word* assures us is true.

We have an example of this in today's Gospel reading

When Jesus asks the twelve if they want to leave,

When so many other of his disciples have already left

Because of the apparent hardness of his teaching.

St Peter puts on the buckle of truth when he says, **'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.'**

And this brings us to the third point: ***God works through our prayer.***

Today's reading ends with words

That show us how, having put on the armour of God,

We can then call on God to go into battle for us.

St Paul writes these words: **Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.**

OK. I'll give one image from modern warfare

That might be helpful in understanding what St Paul is saying.

In modern combat it's not uncommon to have soldiers

On the front line who are holding their position:

They are equipped to defend the ground they hold,

But they do not have the power to take on the opposing force.

But one thing they can do is to call in an airstrike:

To bring forces to bear that are far superior

So that the enemy may be driven from the field.

Now we, as the baptised people of God,

Have all that we need to faithfully hold the ground

That the Lord has assigned to us to guard:

To serve our neighbour as we live out our daily vocations:

It is in the mundane reality of every day life –

Whether it is feeding a baby, or building a house,

Or cooking a meal, or teaching students –
It's in the everyday tasks that God has given us to do
That we are involved in a spiritual struggle of cosmic dimensions.
But while we are called by God to stand our ground,
It is the Lord himself who has the strength to fight for us
In ways that go beyond our power to imagine.
Now, St Paul is saying we call on God to act as we pray:
As we pray for ourselves, and for all the saints:
For one another in the challenges that we face.

Did you notice how St Paul also asked the Ephesian Christians
To pray for *him*: that the Lord would give him the power
To, even in chains, be the sort of ambassador for God
Who would proclaim the mystery of the Gospel with power?
This is encouragement for us: if we would like our pastors
To proclaim the Gospel with a rightly ordered confidence,
And with a boldness that scorns worldly rejection and suffering,
Then we would do well to pray for them,
To pray that God would give them this boldness, this freedom.

It's only God who can give the strength
For the real struggle that we face; and it is Jesus our Lord,
Who lives and reigns at the right hand of the Father,
Who fights for us with the power of the love of God.
So, let us put on the armour that God gives,
And call on God as we stand our ground,
So that the unity that God gives in Christ
May be evident in the love we have for one another.
In Jesus' name. Amen.