

Church of All Nations
Sunday August 25, 2024

Ephesians 6:10-20

Today in the sermon we are going to venture into what is for us largely untravelled territory.

Powers and principalities. Put on the armour.

I was in Brisbane last weekend and popped into the Albert St Uniting Church. Very old building, opened in 1889. Lots of stain glass windows. Along one wall was a series of Arthurian depictions of Knights of the Round table.

Here are three of them. King Arthur, Sir Lancelot, Sir Galahad.

The depiction of the knights in the Brisbane church was drawing on the same inspiration as the The Methodist Order of Knights which the official youth organisation of the Methodist Church of Australasia between 1914- 1987. It originated in Hurstville, NSW, on the 4th October 1914 by the then Mr and later Rev Alex Bray. Alex Bray was a Sunday School teacher and used to speak to his class of the Knights of the Round Table.

Last Knight Grand Commander of the Order Don Hutton said Alec Bray could sweep you off your feet with his enthusiasm.

“When he spoke of King Arthur and his Knights, you believed he had ridden with them,” he said.

The Knight's Motto: "Live Pure, Speak True, Right Wrong, Follow Christ the King, else wherefore born?" You probably could not see the caption on the window depicting Sir Lancelot but it says, A Man with strength and will to right the wrong.

But we have something similar here at CAN. Not a stain glass window but a plaster depiction of a Roman soldier with helmet and shield and sword. Anyone know where it is? Clue not in the church building. Inside and above the above doorway to street just near my office.

¹²For 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.

What do you make of that? How do you understand it. Do you feel motivated, embarrassed, energised.

The writers of the Bible had names that helped them identify the spiritual realities that they encountered. They spoke of angels, demons, principalities

and powers, Satan, gods, and the elements of the universe. In our enlightened age we have largely done away with such concepts unless you are part of a Pentecostal church. But liberal progressive churches mostly gag on the idea of angels and demons convinced that the world had been mercifully swept clean of these medieval superstitions.

Richard Beck writes, “Progressives love Jesus. Love him. The Jesus of the gospels may be the only thing progressives like about Christianity. ..But the truth of the matter is this: If you don't get the battle between Jesus and the satan you don't get Jesus. So if progressive Christians want Jesus they are going to have to figure out a way to get their heads around the fact that Jesus was, first and foremost, an *exorcist*.”

He is not pushing pushing belief in a literal, personal Satan but he does say given the number of times Jesus and the NT use this language we had best attend to it and find a way of understating it rather than just ignore it because we are embarrassed. To ignore it turns moderate liberal theology into a flattened one dimensional philosophy consisting solely of tenets of morality and ethics. The struggle is reduced to human agents and we make them the culprits and target them even though we are told there is something more and beyond.

There have been modern attempts to take seriously, even if not literally the language of “principalities and powers”. I was quite influenced in my student days by this slim little volume *Christ and the Powers* by Hendrik Berkhof.

After the second world war people in Europe were left shattered and asking themselves how could the most biblically literate nation on the face of the earth be so in thrall to the demonic rule of Nazism. Sure you could explain it by economics and over zealous nationalism but some Christians were reaching for language they found in the bible that spoke of spiritual powers that lay behind institutions, structures and systems. Good and God given structures or orders that are given that humans may organise their corporate life, but are also fallen and take on a life of their own and demand allegiance.

But the Powers ... are not just physical. The Bible insists that they are *more* than that (Ephesians 3:10; 6:12); this “more” holds the clue to their profundity. In the biblical view the Powers are at one and the same time visible *and* invisible, earthly, *and* heavenly, spiritual, *and* institutional (Colossians 1:15–20). Powers such as a corporation or a city government possess an outer, physical manifestation (buildings, personnel, trucks, computers) and an inner spirituality, corporate culture, or collective personality.... Perhaps we are not accustomed to thinking of the armed forces or BHP or Apple or...the Labor party or the nation as having a spirituality, but they do. The New Testament uses the language of power to refer at one point to the outer aspect, at another to the inner aspect, and yet again to both together. What people in the world of the Bible experienced as and called “principalities and powers” was in fact the actual spirituality at the center of the political, economic, and cultural institutions of their day.

Walter Wink, another more recent theologian who wrote about these themes considered systemic powers as a mix of good and evil that, like humanity, needs redemption

They are good by virtue of their creation to serve the humanizing purposes of God. They are all fallen, without exception, because they put their own interests above the interests of the whole. And they can be redeemed, because what fell in time can be redeemed in time.

If evil is so profoundly systemic, what chance do we have of bringing [institutions] into line with God's purpose for them? The answer to that question hinges on how we conceive of institutional evil. Are the Powers intrinsically evil? Or are some good? Or are they scattered all along the spectrum from good to evil? The answer seems to be: all of the above. Put in stark simplicity:

The Powers are good.

The Powers are fallen.

The Powers must be redeemed....

And so as part of Ephesians we are urged to, "Put on the armour". I think the most important thing to remember about this passage is those addressed in Ephesians were not a triumphant majority but opposite – a struggling oppressed minority battling for survival. Imagining different audiences can change the way we read scripture. For instance image the difference between reading/preaching this passage to a group of refugees who have washed up upon the shores of Australia seeking protection and reading/preaching to a gathering of cardinals or archbishops who while much reduced in reputation and power still hold some status in Australian society. Or business magnates.

Protection is a popular concept in these days and even more prevalent during the height of the Coved pandemic. We heard it often, Wear a mask to protect you and others, get a test as part of your responsibility to protect the community. And what is the purpose of a vaccine but to offer protection.

So we hear virtually every commentator on this passage stress that the armour referred to by Paul is, apart from the sword, all protective wear. To guard and protect us; not to allow us to smite our enemy.... and this is made clear by repeated calls not to smite the enemy but to "stand firm".



Yes, it is an analogy for a fight, for as we are told the struggle, the battle, is not with flesh and blood but is a spiritual one. I do not warm to language of battle

but increasingly am realising that yes it is a battle we are in. What decision you must make, what temptation you struggle with, what decision to spend your money, what provocation to anger, what substance you put into your body... all this is a spiritual battle. Of course this is a spiritual battle, in that following Jesus we will be called upon to do many things that do not come naturally and that require us to overcome ourselves. Things like praying for our enemies, turning the other cheek, forgiving endlessly, etc., To follow Jesus means in many respects to live "embattled".

But this is important: We can only use warfare language when we have grasped the weakness of God as manifest in the cross of Christ. Otherwise language of warfare, military imagery, battle cries will lead us to demonise our opponents. Outcome is not to smite our enemies but to stand, withstand

Paul, having pontificated at length about the greatness and mystery of God, the marvel of grace, and leading a life worthy of all that, closes his letter with an urgent invitation: "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might." It's not just "Be strong!" but "Be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of his might." What this means is that the true strength we crave isn't ours, but the Lord's. Vicariously, we share in his strength. It's like being strong enough to bear the world. I can try to be Atlas, hoisting it on my shoulders, which is exhausting, or I can move forward with the Lord who's got the whole world in his hands.

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Maybe this week as we dress each morning, we could intentionally in our imagination put on "truth", "righteousness", "peace", "faith, salvation, the Spirit", and as we leave our bedroom take to ourselves a sword, which is, "the Word." We read God's Word, we trust in spiritual realities, not to beat the world, but not to surrender either. Wisdom is knowing where you really are, and whose you really are.