

## Highfield Rd Uniting Church

### Ephesians 6: 10 – 20      **Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh**

“Our struggle is against the forces of evil, so put on the armour of God.”

The interpretation and appropriation of this text over the centuries has been a sad story. In depicting a spiritual struggle, Paul uses the metaphor of the Roman soldier but – ironically – this metaphor seems to have been too strong. Too many times, Paul’s concept of a spiritual struggle has been replaced by real struggle and war. In more modern times, either the militaristic overtones of the passage or its talk of cosmic powers and spiritual forces has caused it to be largely ignored.

If Paul’s wonderful concluding message to a young community in persecution fails to convey to us the Word of God, it’s because we are too earth bound and physical to perceive the spiritual. Paul clearly says that “our struggle is **not** against enemies of blood and flesh”. In the middle of describing how we should equip ourselves for the struggle, he steps out of the military metaphor to suggest that we should put on as shoes for our feet “whatever will make you ready to proclaim the Gospel of peace.” Sadly, however, this passage has been quoted as a justification for burning heretics and witches and proclaiming holy war.

Paul talks of the ‘armour’ of God as being truth, righteousness, faith, peace, salvation and the word of God, yet every image I found associated with this passage features a Roman soldier or a medieval knight. Can no one imagine a metaphorical image showing an ordinary person who has Paul’s words for God’s armour inscribed on their head, chest and waist, and is carrying a Bible? A peaceful person who has heard Paul’s urging to be strong in the Lord.

I think the misunderstanding begins with the first word of this passage: “Finally”. Too many readers and commentators interpret this word in the apocalyptic sense – the end of the world and the fight against the anti-Christ, etc. They ignore the fact that Paul is simply concluding his letter. This final passage sits with the rest of the letter to complete a picture of what it means to live a Christian life in light of all that God has done in Jesus Christ. It can be placed alongside all the Psalms and prophets that talk about not putting your hope in horses, chariots, swords or bows because our hope is in the Lord! We are not called to live a Christian life in our own strength, but in the strength of the Lord and working through His power. The armour we are called to put on is not **real** armour. Our strength and power come alive when God’s armour – faith, hope, salvation and truth – are realities in our life and not just the words of worship.

The readers in first century Ephesus would have been under significant pressure because this new religion they were following was illegal and they were being persecuted. They would have faced both peer pressure and social pressure to kneel to the emperor at the Temple of Domitian or to worship at the Temple of Artemis. But the struggle they endured was spiritual; it was nothing to do with breastplates or helmets. To further emphasise this point, Paul reminds his readers that he is in chains. There is no war or rebellion here; the man telling you to engage in struggle is in prison and still preaching the gospel!

Paul’s message is to stand firm in the faith by taking up all that the faith has to offer – salvation, truth, peace, and the presence and help of the Spirit. In chapter 5, he tells us to be filled with the Spirit, so is it any wonder that here, in the conclusion, he tells us to take up the sword of the Spirit?

It is important to remember that at the time that this letter is being written there is no Christian scripture. When Paul refers to the sword of the Spirit, he is talking about the Word of God. 'Taking up the sword' means allowing the Spirit to give you the words that you need, when you need them. It means being filled with the Spirit.

Temptation, distraction, doubt, self-interest, rational secularism, individualism, consumerism and many other political or philosophical 'isms – these are the sources of our struggle. We are not fighting against flesh and blood enemies but against cosmic powers and spiritual forces. To dismiss this passage in Ephesians because it talks about things that sound like demons or weird, old-fashioned metaphysics is to ignore the reality that we are more than flesh and blood – and so is everyone else. You may not like to talk about demons, but it's hard to explain evil in the world without looking to something beyond a rational, physical philosophy. People who live in the sphere of business or politics understand and experience the thirst for chaos, the dehumanising language and behaviour, and the focus on money, influence and power at the expense of service, compassion and humility. The language of cosmic powers and spiritual forces is not archaic; it speaks to the reality that broken humanity cannot explain everything.

Our struggle is against spiritual forces and it is hard. We need help. The walk of the disciple in this world is hard, and we need help. These are the things that we have been looking at in Ephesians over the past few weeks. The reality of the life that is ours in Jesus Christ – the "So what?" of all that theology of reconciliation – points us to a life that is hard because it is at odds with the world around us. Our struggle to hold to faith is hard, and we need help. Our struggle to hold to unity in the community of faith is hard, and we need help. Our struggle to control our emotions and imitate God in forgiveness and love is hard, and we need help. Our struggle to find the will of God for ourselves and the church is hard, and we need help.

Standing for something in the face of a world that thinks and acts so very differently is hard. Paul looks to the life of the soldier for a metaphor for struggle, but at the same time rejects the life of the soldier as violent and confrontational. Instead he points us to the inner life of faith, hope, truth and prayer. In the conclusion to his explanation of what it means to be reconciled to God, he tells us that within this inner life we will experience both our struggle and our defence. To face the spiritual struggle, seek the strength and power of God!

God, in Christ, has reconciled the world to 'God-self'. Those who accept that reconciliation are called to a life of the Spirit – a life that is about love, forgiveness, community, humility and truth. This is not the life of the world, so there will inevitably be conflict and struggle. However, God also assures us that in the Spirit we will find the strength and power to stand firm in the face of struggle.

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