

Trinity 21

I take as my text today the words of St. Paul in his Epistle to the Ephesians:

“Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.”

Fear and mistrust of others, suspicion and hatred; from one corner of the world to another, the ravages of war, of insurgencies, atrocities by zealots purporting to carry out the will of God; people who are more afraid of peace than of all the tragedy of war and discord; diseases that ravage the poor and misfortunate — yes, that was the world during the time of St. Paul, but not unlike our world today.

No matter how much we have progressed over the centuries, little has changed.

Still, throughout the world, we find much of the same conditions as did St. Paul.

Today, we live in a time, in a world, that has made so many scientific and technological advances; yet, despite all our capability, all our technology, all our medical advances, thousands die of starvation every day, and other thousands are so severely debilitated by malnutrition that they will never, ever, fully recover sufficiently to be productive members of their societies.

Despite the evolution of humankind through the advancement of knowledge in every area of human life, the question is still asked: is the world better off?

Within our own country, founded upon Christian principles, and pre-eminent in socio-economic and technological development, we are not immune. So many of our leaders, at every level, have become victims of what has been termed human secularism, perhaps more easily recognized as “me-ism,” the product of a “me-istic society.” Remember the 60’s, and the “I’m okay, you’re okay” philosophy?

This human secularism has even permeated religion, where we find so often trendy religious leaders and clergy preoccupied with the superficialities of religion, engaged in a mere flirtation with the truly spiritual aspects of our existence as creatures of God.

It has become quite easy these days to paint a picture of doom and gloom. History itself has given us the paint brush. The failure of every great civilization, including Greece and Rome, can be traced to the same causes: a decline in moral discipline, facilitated by a fixation on self-gratification.

In our own society today, this is reflected, on the one hand, by “political correctness” and “inclusiveness,” and on the other, by a dismissal of, and a failure to accept “individual responsibility.”

How did we get to the state we are in?

If we were to ask a hundred people, we could in all likelihood get a hundred different answers. Perhaps, even if we asked a thousand people, none would come up with what St. Paul tells us. Not in this day and time.

In today’s epistle passage, St. Paul re-introduces us to our spiritual reality; a reality which most of us find difficult to accept. The difficulty, perhaps, comes because we are so involved in the physical reality of our existence that we find it difficult, if not nearly impossible, to relate to the spiritual reality of our existence.

Yes, we are spiritual, as well as physical, beings. Moreover, our spiritual side is constantly under attack by an evil presence represented by what scripture calls the devil, or the evil one.

Now, what if I were to say to you that all the things that go wrong in this world are the doings of the Devil? What is your reaction? Skepticism? Perhaps, mentally associating me with some of the other religious nuts? Might it cross your mind that maybe I've gone a little too far this time?

The concept even of the existence of the Devil is difficult for many to fathom, the idea of his being an interactive reality in our world raises more than a few eyebrows.

Yet, in the Epistle passage we read today, St. Paul is saying just that, saying that evil is a reality; that the Devil is a spiritual reality that is also interacting in our world, and is the root cause of so much misfortune and tragedy for which God has often been blamed: indeed, a formidable enemy with whom we struggle from the moment we enter this world until we leave it.

This evil one, *Prince of Darkness*, is not a myth, even as St. Paul says, in his words:

"...we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers."

We are flesh and blood, yet, we are also spiritual, and, as Christians, we have spiritual enemies; spiritual enemies who powerful, wicked, and cunning in their being able to persuade people that God does not exist.

A good example of this cunning is reflected among a number of contemporary theologians, whose tendency is to interpret St. Paul as referring to structures of thought, as in the state and its institutions, in particular tradition, convention, law, authority, and religion, rather than *principalities and powers*.

Some theologians make a transference from *principalities and powers* to *social, economic, and political forces*.

If, indeed, structures, traditions, institutions, and so forth, are evil in themselves, what would be a natural conclusion? There is no God? Anarchy?

In this new age, the beginning of the 21st century, we Christians, especially we Anglicans, have come a long way in putting to rest many of the myths that became associated with our religious heritage. Perhaps, too good, for we have become less inclined to accept the presence of an unseen, or spiritual world of a fallen angel. Many of us find it difficult to rationalize the duality of our own existence as physical and spiritual creatures.

We are rational beings; that is what separates us from the rest of the creatures in this world. This rationality is one of the great gifts God gave us as human. It is our "free will."

Free Will allows us not only to choose between good and evil, but also to recognize what good **is** and what evil **is**. More importantly, it allows us to choose to love God or to reject Him.

Here, we come face-to-face again with St. Paul who is saying to us that in choosing to be Christians, we have also chosen to engage the whole of evil, even the Devil and his associates, his demonic band, in spiritual warfare:

"For we wrestle not against the flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places."

Our spiritual enemy knows well our weaknesses, and plays on them. He knows the limits of our temptation, what we will give in to. He is insidious, subtle; he knows each of us quite well, and works on us.

But, St. Paul tells us that we are not powerless if we stand up as soldiers of Christ, dressed for battle in the whole armor of God.

Throughout the Old Testament, God is depicted as a warrior fighting to vindicate the Jewish people, God's Chosen. In the Book of Isaiah we find, *He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation upon his head.*

So, as soldiers in this spiritual war, we must be properly outfitted. In the mind of St. Paul this means *the full armor of a heavily-armed soldier.*

Paul details the six main pieces of a soldier's equipment, concentrating not on the completeness of the outfit, vis-à-vis the Roman soldier, but on the divineness, vis-à-vis the Christian, the belt, the breastplate, the boots, the shield, the helmet, and the sword, which reflect truth, righteousness, good news of peace, faith, salvation, and the word of God.

Just as a good Roman infantryman, we will be equipped for the battle against the powers of darkness.

St. Paul's use of the Roman soldier for comparison in describing the armor of God brought in a sense of urgency, as well as relevance, to the role of the early Christian in this spiritual warfare.

First, *The Girdle of Truth*. For the Roman soldier, the girdle was a belt, usually made of leather, which was really part of his underwear, and gathered up his tunic. It also held his sword, and "gave him a sense of hidden strength and confidence."

For the Christian, this *Girdle of Truth* has a two-fold meaning: honesty and truthfulness, integrity and sincerity on the one hand, and truth of doctrine on the other hand.

Next, *The Breastplate of Righteousness*. The soldier's breastplate was his major piece of armor covering his front, and frequently his back, as well, and afforded protection to his vital organs.

For the Christian, the *Breastplate of Righteousness* has been described as meaning both justification and righteousness of character and conduct.

Thirdly, *The Boot of the Gospel*. The Roman soldier wore a "half-boot," called the caliga, which prepared him for long marches, as well as for a solid stance in battle.

With the boots of the Gospel, the Christian is on firm footing, and ever ready to bear witness to Jesus Christ.

The fourth piece of armor is the *Shield of Faith*. The shield referred to is not the round shield, but the long, full body shield, made to be particularly effective against incendiary darts.

The Christian's *Shield of Faith* can protect against "all the flaming darts of the evil one," that is mischievous accusations, thoughts of doubt and disobedience, rebellion, lust, malice or fear.

Next, *The Helmet of Salvation*. The Roman soldier's helmet was made of bronze or iron, and lined with felt or sponge, and, essentially, only the blow from an axe or hammer could pierce the helmet.

The Christian's helmet is the *Hope of Salvation*, the knowledge that through Jesus Christ we are saved; we have been delivered from Satan's bondage, and adopted into God's family.

Finally, *The Sword of the Spirit*. The soldier's sword that Paul refers to is not the long sword, but the short sword which involves a close, personal encounter with the enemy. It is a sword that can be used for both attack and defense.

The sword of the Spirit is the Word of God. The Word of God is closely associated with the Scripture that is accepted as divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit and has over the centuries been a sword for every Christian evangelist.

Thus, we have the six pieces of armour. But it is up to us to put it on. We must choose to wear the full armour of God.

We must be watchful; we must stay alert because our spiritual enemy, like a hungry lion, is always on the prowl.

As we fight the good fight against evil, Satan and his minions, there are two things within the Christian's arsenal that are the most effective weapons ever: God's Love and Prayer.

In the hands of each Christian, love, the love that comes from God, and abounds within us, is a most formidable weapon. Evil shrinks from it in fear.

Then, there is prayer: earnest and diligent prayer.

Indeed, Paul concludes the 11 verses by asking the congregations to pray for him that he might be courageous and inspired.

And we must pray; for prayer is a powerful weapon. Paul doesn't mean just a little prayer here and there, but to engage in prayer, to persevere in prayer. Pray for all the saints in Christ, for unity of the Church, for the Whole State of Christ's Church.