

Sunday 18 August 2024, Trinity 12 Parish Eucharist

Ephesians 6.10–20

The Revd Dr Evan McWilliams

One thing you may not know about me is that I love a good children's book. I love their brevity; it appeals to my slightly ADHD brain. I love their clarity; there's a goodie and a baddie and we usually know which is which. And, perhaps above all, I love their illustrations! I know we're told not to judge a book by its cover, but with children's books, one often can. And we're meant to. The images are integral to the story. One of my favourite illustrations is from a book called *William the Curious: Knight of the Water Lilies*. William is a frog who lives in a castle moat and at one point in the story he appears wearing tiny armour and is knighted by the Queen of the Land of Far and Wide with his own tiny sword. This image is what I think of every time I hear our second lesson from the book of Ephesians.

It's a striking image, isn't it, putting on the armour of God? The belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, the sword of the Spirit: it's total body cover-- with freedom of movement for the arms. We're told this armour is for fighting 'the rulers, the authorities, the cosmic powers of this present darkness'. *And suddenly I feel very small*. Like the little frog William, I tremble in my tiny armour, confronted by the glowering storm of the SPIRITUAL FORCES OF EVIL IN THE HEAVENLY PLACES. Don't restrain your imagination; I think we're meant to see and to feel the significance of what St Paul is saying. Like a good children's book, we have in summary a goodie and a very-bad-indeed baddie, or group of baddies anyway. There's the clarity we need, and the brevity: life is a struggle, 'not against enemies of blood and flesh'. If it were that, I doubt I'd be so terrified. But put on this armour, and you will do well. *If I'm sure to do well, why do I still tremble?*

I've been having some very interesting conversations of late with a few people exploring faith more deeply. Yesterday- and you know who you are- we talked about the devil, and a little about evil. Allow me to bring St Paul to bear on these issues, for the benefit of us all. The world he describes is dangerous. There are malign forces out there preparing to attack. Wickedness dwells even in heavenly places and in order to survive, it is necessary to fight, or at least to be ready to defend. Unlike a human opponent, this enemy doesn't just attack you, but it sows discord and strife around you. I say, 'this enemy', but St Paul doesn't speak in only the singular. There isn't just one deadly enemy. Our antagonist isn't the fiery eye of Sauron gazing out from Barad-dur. It isn't the Goblin King scheming in his Labyrinth. Nor is it the White Witch turning the springtime of the world into eternal winter. Our enemy isn't personified as the devil, a singular dark force to balance and oppose God. Though perhaps there is a sense of an evil one among them fitting his fiery arrows to the string to shoot at those that are true of heart, as the Psalmist puts it. The evil one may stand in for every force that would seek to pierce our hearts with doubt, grief, and feelings of isolation.

Rather, these forces are both greater and lesser than one could be. They are greater in that their rule is more extensive; they are everywhere. Yet they are lesser because, though evil, they are

without motive apart from desiring to unmake all that is good. They have no animating character, no quirk of personality to make them comprehensible or relatable. They are of the kind of evil that destroys through banality and wastes with glacial patience. This is the evil of a poisonous rain falling indiscriminately over all the land, or of a deadening plague which makes the whole world seem to lose its lustre. Nameless, placeless, gnawing things which seem to have some form of dominion over this world, at least for a time. I am sure they are like this because of the description of the weapons we are given to fight them, weapons that are their opposites. Truth to correct falsehood and lies, righteousness to build up and sustain character, the proclamation of the gospel- good news to gladden the heart and brighten the eyes, faith to put aside mistrust, salvation to steady the mind and maintain certainty, and the word of God to pierce the darkness of the heart with a steady clear light. These are weapons of precision, stability, and certainty. They sparkle with divine influence in the midst of the dull haze of battle, beacons of God's own intervention, God the eternal gloom-piercer who said to the watery chaos in the beginning, 'Let there be light!'

With weapons like these, even the smallest knight can be assured victory. These gifts are God's armour: '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... Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication.' Because that is how you will obtain these weapons, and it is how you will be trained to use them. Prayer is the armoury and the weapons-master, shaping your handling of truth, righteousness, good news, faith, salvation, and the word of God. Be of good courage, even ye of little faith, for these are God's powerful weapons, gifts for your sure defence. And, if you're so blessed, for your triumphant attack on threatening wickedness.

I wonder if you can picture yourself girded for battle. I can, because I know what that battle looks like and I have seen this armour in use. It looks like the child kneeling at her bedside asking God to bless her daddy working late. It looks like the grey-haired nan nervously fingering her confirmation bible, looking for the right passage to bring comfort to a friend soon to die. It looks like a family standing together to sing hymns in church every week. It looks like you, sitting as you are now, waiting to hear what God may be saying to you because there are so many voices in the world that seem only to bring sadness and confusion. The battle is here. The battle is at home. The battlefield is the world; but you, dear little frog knight, trembling as you may be, have been given the full armour of God. Every piece is in your size and every skill is yours to learn by patient prayer and simple faith.

Arise, sir knight. Arise, gracious lady. '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.' The enemy is terrible. But the armour is God's. The strength for battle is God's. The victory, already certain through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, is God's. The glorious victory, when it comes, is God's, and the spoils of war are already prepared for you his 'faithful soldiers true and bold' who have fought the good fight with Him for right and truth and triumphant, exultant love. Do not be afraid, though you tremble within. You will win. And even death shall die. Amen.