

Sermon on Sunday 25 August 2024

by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader

Ephesians 6 11: Put on the whole Armour of God

From my very early Sunday School days, I have fond memories of our reading from Ephesians. It was so much more fun for a primary school lad with a growing collection of Airfix plastic soldiers to be able to colour in a Roman soldier instead of the usual offering of donkeys and angels.

If we accept the view of some scholars that Ephesians was written by St Paul in Rome near the end of his life, when he was effectively under house arrest, it is easy to imagine Paul looking up from his desk, seeing the sentry at his door and finding the inspiration for his much-loved exhortation, 'Put on the whole armour of God'. Though Paul owes the idea to older sources. The breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation both come straight from the prophecies of Isaiah, and his readers would recognise both as hallmarks of the promised Messiah.

The scholars tell us that in many ancient cultures, when armour was the expensive privilege of kings and the wealthy military aristocracy, the giving of armour was a significant event. A mark of commissioning to high command, an acknowledgment of acceptance into the warrior class, perhaps even a mark of adoption into a royal household.

Note that Paul invites us to accept God's armour – and all that goes with it.

St Paul, for all the brilliance of his theological vision, was a fiercely combative character who struggled to conceal his annoyance at those who did not share his views, and when he wasn't arguing with others he was usually wrestling with his own inner demons. So, it's not surprising that he looks to military imagery to explore his dependence on his God's power.

But military language in Church can be bit controversial these days, and thankfully you don't see body armour on the streets, at least not in Hertford. But when I look up from my desk (on office days), I'll often see the modern equivalent of the sentry – our IT security officer. We're never quite sure if she's our guardian or our jailor. As she was setting up a new young colleague's IT on Monday, inducting him into all the privileges and responsibilities of life in the family of DZ Bank, it struck me that perhaps she could give us a modern metaphor for what Paul was trying to say, for Paul, too, wrote his letters to young churches, and to believers only setting out on their lives of faith. What might he say now?

First, God is giving you a unique ID for your log in – treasure it and protect it. As your password, choose the name of Jesus – it may be known to the world, but it works only for those who know him. And this is a password you never have to change.

Then install Justice and Righteousness as your anti-virus shield – it will save you from corruption and the malware of the Evil One.

Set up Salvation as your back-up system. No matter how big a mess you make of your own device, what God has done for you in Christ Jesus will always be there for you. Imagine him in the clouds, if that helps.

Apply Discipleship as your security setting and as your tracking blocker. It will keep Satan off your back.

Apply Faith as your search filter – trust in God will guide you to good places.

Use the Truth of the Gospel as your fact checker.

And now God has given you all you need to ensure your safety – let your Zeal for the Gospel be your internet speed and the grace of God be your WiFi signal as you go boldly into the Metaverse (or whatever you want to call it) and share your love for God and the world.

I think St Paul would like that.

Paul speaks of the dangers of the world, the wiles of the devil; He speaks of 'rulers authorities and cosmic powers of this dark age'. This is the language of spiritual warfare. It was the mindset of the times, especially in the Eastern Mediterranean where oriental mystery cults were popular and the turmoil of 1st Century political and economic life was seen by many as mirroring an existential war between the powers of good and evil in the heavens.

In times when economic stability and the joys of a quiet life were routinely denied by war, famine and disease, it was understandable to attribute the ills of the age to some external unseeable force, beyond human control and unresponsive to their prayers. But if St Paul is happy to borrow the vocabulary, he does not share the fatalistic resignation.

Paul has God at his side and he's ready to continue the fight.

You can probably see the parallel. Cyber warfare replaces spiritual warfare. It is easy in our age to feel that our lives are mere

echoes of the machinations of higher powers that exist in a disembodied world up in the clouds, and that does not really respond to the prompts we give it or the brakes we try to apply. Where there is far more information than ever before, but little to guide us towards truth. Where the opportunities for connection are boundless, but there seems to be so little time or space for relationship. Where it is safer to live behind a mask, with digitally edited portraits and digitally edited lifestyles. Where we fear that every click may be an attempt to mislead us, to ensnare us, to steal our identity. St Paul would find plenty of good imagery in our online world.

But Paul's message would still be one of confidence. He knows the dangers, but he sees the opportunities. Get out there and live in faith, but go prepared. Get the complete tool kit for the job. Take everything Jesus offers to keep you safe - truth, justice, zeal, faith, scripture, and - the one he actually talks most about - prayer. It's not a pick'n'mix, take the lot. You'll need it.



God and his servants, like Paul, are wise and honest enough to warn us that there are dangers in our world – physical, virtual or spiritual. But he doesn't want us to be afraid of that world, he doesn't want us to flee from it or hide from it. He wants us to love it, to heal it, to rejoice in it and rejoice with it.

So, you've got your commission, get all your kit together, and let's go on campaign.

Amen