**26th August 2012**

**Ephesians 6.10-20; John 6.56-69**

During our recent holiday to France we called in to see the museum about the Great War near Amiens on the River Somme. It was a fascinating and also a sombre experience looking at this war to end all wars. It was remarkable to think that a million men in Britain alone ‘volunteered’ (they weren’t conscripted) to go to war – such was the spirit of triumphalism and patriotism. They wanted to be heroes, to go on an adventure – believing the war would be over in a couple of months.

One room showed all the equipment and uniforms of the soldiers from all sides. They displayed the French soldier’s uniform and equipment at the start of the war and the information said they were ill equipped. The French were dressed with style and panache, as you would expect of the French who like to pride themselves on their appearance and fashion sense. But it is no use looking good on the Western Front if your uniform and equipment is not going to protect you. They had bright colours, no helmets, just cloth caps and virtually no protective gear. They were dressed like throwbacks to the Napoleonic Wars yet found themselves in a totally different arena of war one hundred years further on. Within a matter of months the French army were totally re equipped.

Paul in his letter to the Ephesians draws on the metaphor of soldiers armour to discuss how we need to be aware we are in a conflict, a battle, and how we need to protect ourselves and have the necessary armour to stand firm.

Ephesians is a great letter. Paul spends the first five chapters describing the divine plan to unite the whole church and the whole creation under Christ’s headship – to bring a new oneness, a unity in diversity, purity and a harmony which will be the characteristics of a new life and a new society in Christ. It is a fantastic vision, a beautiful ideal, a desirable goal – but of course it is difficult to attain.

In the last chapter of this letter Paul brings us down to earth and to realities harsher than dreams. He reminds us of the opposition. Beneath surface appearances an unseen spiritual battle is raging. He introduces us to the devil and to certain principalities and powers. He is in effect saying – ever wondered why the world is so divided, why so many reject God, why there is little peace, unity and harmony. We face opposition. There are active agents out to destroy what God wants.

It’s a painful shock. We all wish we could have a sweet and charming existence but Paul issues a stirring call to battle. Not just to an isolated conflict but to realise that we will be in an on-going battle until the final consummation when God creates all things new and Christ returns.

It’s going to be hard to be a disciple and live for the fulfilling of this great vision of unity and peace that the letter to the Ephesians holds before us.

John’s gospel has the passage where many of Jesus disciples decide this is too hard following Jesus and leave him. So Jesus asks the 12 – do they also want to leave? Peter says who can we go to – you have the words of eternal life.

Peter’s response is striking. He doesn’t say yes, of course, but he doesn’t quite say no either. Instead, in good Jesus-style, he answers back with another question: To whom else can we go? It is not, perhaps, the most flattering answer in the world, but it is honest. It’s a little reminiscent of Winston Churchill’s famous description of democracy as the worst form of government except for every other form that has ever been tried. Following Jesus may not always be easy or pleasant, or even totally comprehensible, but when it comes to the eternal-life business, to tell the truth there’s not much out there in the way of alternatives.

As ethicist Lewis Smedes said, "This is where the trolley stops. . . Without Jesus we are stuck with two options: utopian illusion or deadly despair. I scorn illusion. I dread despair. So I put all my money on Jesus." We might not be sure why this stuff is happening to us. We may be facing difficulties, hardships, conflict, defeats. But where else can we go?

Do you also wish to go away? The young church at Ephesus is struggling to maintain its existence when the worship of Artemis or Caesar or Mammon are so much more attractive alternatives. Paul ends a letter to the Ephesians with an extended metaphor that sounds violently unattractive in our day: "put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil."

Apparently Paul did not expect following Jesus to be easy. He talks about the life of those in the church as if it’s going to be a kind of war. No soldier ever exclaimed in hurt tones during a battle: "Hey -- they’re shooting at me." Getting shot at is more or less what you expect when you sign up in the army.

Paul, however, knew that the citizens of Ephesus saw helmets and breastplates, shields and swords, every day. Rome did not always speak softly but it carried a big stick

Paul tells everyone to gear up for battle, but it is a different kind of battle. It is marked by truth -- which is the first casualty of war. Its advance is marked by salvation – healing, wholeness, rather than body bags. Its gospel -- its good news, the headlines of the PR department -- is peace. Walter Bruggemann has written that the ancient texts of scripture can be read as subversive material, as a way for those without power to undermine and conspire against the damage being done by the "rulers and authorities." Few texts are more subversive than Paul’s words at the end of this letter.

Look at what Paul identifies as protection for the followers of Jesus: truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, and the Word of God -- all based in the strength of God. How consistent with the teachings of Jesus and how non-aggressive and non-offensive!

Dodging the rain showers as best I could, I went to Greenbelt yesterday. One of the speakers I heard was an American Jesuit called John Dear who was active in campaigning for justice and peace and following the non violent way of Jesus. He talked about spiritual violence. The violence we do with our words – and ow we need to communicate non violently – live peaceful lives that follow the Lord Jesus Christ. Talk of armour and using military analogies is fraught with danger.

A biblical scholar had given a lecture in the United States to a group of churches on the meaning of Genesis 2–3. He had suggested that the narrative was “more than history.” The reaction of some church members was to suspect heresy. A few weeks later he received a letter from a group who claimed to speak for the true church. In that letter, they suggested that he cleanse the church from the evil he represented by using the enclosed. What was enclosed was a razor blade! The church groups involved claimed that they were fulfilling the message in Ephesians 6. They claimed to be wearing the armour of God, to be girded with the truth, and to be using the sword of the Spirit against evil. Anyone who dared to read the biblical text in a way that differed from their accepted tradition was to be rejected so as to protect that body of Christ. Spiritual violence.

I went to a seminar about gay marriage at greenbelt. A man there told how he had become a Christian and was part of a Pentecostal church and his foreman at work was gay. He was a good bloke he said but once he was going on about how he enjoyed going to the gay nightclub in London called ‘Heaven’. This man confessed that he left his foreman a note after this that said the heaven nightclub was the only heaven he was going to get into. He had tears in his eyes because at the time he thought he was engaging in a spiritual battle but now he just sees his arrogance, hatred and lack of grace.

We are in a struggle – a struggle that love may win, a battle that evil and darkness may not destroy all the peace and unity that God wills for humanity. Jesus says he has come to bring us life – the work of the devil is to bring us death.

Paul says we need to do two things. First of all trust in God’s mighty power not your own. We are far too weak and fallible to stand against evil. Only the power of God can defend and deliver us because no matter how strong the power of evil is, the power of God, the power of love, the power of goodness - will overcome it – that is a creedal statement for our faith.

Paul urges us to draw on the power, might and strength of the Lord Jesus Christ and the power of God that raised Christ from the darkness of death. First of all we need God’s help.

Secondly there is something we can do – put on the armour of God. Without it we shall be fatally unprotected and exposed – a bit like those French soldiers on the Western Front at the start of the First World War. But we need to take it up and put it on, piece by piece as the apostle goes on to explain in verses 13 to 17.

It is important to have our clothes and other things ready for the day ahead. Paul reminds us that it is just as important to put on our spiritual armour and prepare for the spiritual battles that we will face today.

As I put on my pants and belt, I am reminded that I am to have the

“belt of truth fastened around my waist” (v. 14). I cannot feel remotely secure without my pants and a belt to hold them up. Putting on my belt gives me a sense of security and readiness. If my pants fall down, I can’t hope to do anything. This belt reminds me of the belt of truth of God in Christ and in the Holy Scripture. Jesus stated, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). As I buckle on my belt, I remember the truths about God’s love, and I know that he will not leave me or forsake me. Truth could also mean our lives – live lives of honesty, sincerity – certainly by living in this way we will avoid evil and temptation.

When I put on my shirt, I remember that I am to have “the breastplate of righteousness in place” (v. 14). My shirt, like the breastplate, is crucial because it covers all my vital organs. It covers my heart, my lungs, my liver and stomach, everything that keeps me alive. As I button my shirt, I am reminded that my righteousness comes from God. It is not something I can earn or deserve. Earlier in this letter to the Ephesians, Paul reminds us, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (2:8). I accept this righteousness and work with God through the Holy Spirit to be perfected in righteousness every day. There is nothing more important to live in a right relationship with God – you are ready for anything. Just like the ambiguity with truth in the belt of truth – righteousness could also refer also to being in good relationships with your neighbour.

Slipping on my shoes, I am reminded that my “feet are fitted with

whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace” (v. 15). My shoes are important because they protect my feet. They provide me with balance and prepare me to move and take action. I can go out in any kind of weather knowing my shoes will keep my feet dry and give me traction so I can move. With God’s peace in my heart I can be assured of my salvation, and I can cast aside my anxieties knowing that God will work all things for good (Romans 8:28). I can have peace with God, peace with others, and peace with myself. That is a great thing to share wherever my feet take me.

Now the “shield of faith” (v. 16) is not something we wear, but something that we take up. When I pick up my brief case, backpack, or computer case, I think about this shield. I know today the devil will be firing missiles at me—temptations, evil thoughts, doubts, lust malice, fear, fiery trials—and I will need a strong shield to defend myself. My faith points me to a power higher, stronger than myself, so I can deflect and extinguish the devil’s flaming arrows.

I do not normally wear a hat, but I am reminded of the “helmet of salvation” (v. 17) when I put on my glasses or my contact lenses. You may wear a hat every day, and this is a perfect reminder of this powerful helmet. If you don’t wear a hat or glasses, perhaps you can think about putting on this helmet when you put in your contact lenses or when you brush your hair. The helmet is crucial because it covers our heads and the vital organ of our brain. I remind myself that I have been saved through the death of Jesus Christ and not anyone or anything can take this salvation from me. I know that I am saved, that I am being saved, and that I ultimately will be completely saved. I can hold my head up high in confidence.

The “sword of the Spirit” (v. 17) is again not something you wear but something to be grasped. It is the only offensive weapon we are told to use. As a minister, I am usually carrying a Bible with me, and this is my sword. Perhaps you could begin to carry a Bible with you to work or school in your briefcase, your backpack, or your purse. Just as Jesus used this mighty sword, the word of God, to defend himself against the temptations of the evil one, so we can use this sword to defend ourselves and even attack the devil’s evil intentions. Scripture has cutting power, particularly the bits you don’t like or are offensive to modern ears – that’s where the real dialogue with God begins. But at least it should take you back to God – what is God’s word?

This week, as you practice your daily morning routine, consider adding the routine of putting on the full armour of God?

We are called to stand firm – stay committed to the Holy One – the one who has the words of eternal life.

*At the Olympic games in Paris in 1924 the sport of canoe racing was added to the list of international competitions. The favorite team in the four-man canoe race was the United States team. One member of that team was a young man by the name of Bill Havens.*

*As the time for the Olympics neared, it became clear that Bill's wife would give birth to her first child about the time that Bill would be competing in the Paris Games. In 1924 there were no jet airliners from Paris to the United States, only slow-moving ocean-going ships. And so Bill found himself in a dilemma. Should he go to Paris and risk not being at his wife's side when their first child was born? Or should he withdraw from the team and remain behind. Bill's wife insisted that he go to Paris. After all, he had been working towards this for all these years. It was the culmination of a life-long dream.*

*Clearly the decision was not easy for Bill to make. Finally, after much soul searching, Bill decided to withdraw from the competition and remain behind with his wife so that he could be with her when their first child arrived. Bill considered being at her side a higher priority than going to Paris to fulfill a life-long dream.*

*To make a long story short, the United States four-man canoe team won the gold medal at the Paris Olympics. And Bill's wife was late in giving birth to her first child. She was so late that Bill could have competed in the event and returned home in time to be with her when she gave birth.*

*People said, "What a shame." But Bill said he had no regrets. After all, his commitment to his wife was more important then, and it still was now.*

*The story of Bill Havens is a story of how one man paid a high price to fulfill a commitment to someone he loved.*

*There is a sequel to the story of Bill Havens. The child eventually born to Bill and his wife was a boy, whom they named Frank. Twenty-eight years later, in 1952, Bill received a cablegram from Frank. It was sent from Helsinki, Finland, where the 1952 Olympics were being held. The cablegram read, and I quote it exactly: "Dad, I won. I'm bringing home the gold medal you lost while waiting for me to be born."*

*Frank Havens had just won the gold medal for the United States in the canoe-racing event, a medal his father had dreamed of winning but never did. Maybe others have to complete the victory - but victory is assured.*

Jim Wallis writes that when the South African government cancelled a political rally against apartheid, Desmond Tutu led a worship service in St. George’s Cathedral. The walls were lined with soldiers and riot police carrying guns and bayonets, ready to close it down. Bishop Tutu began to speak of the evils of the apartheid system -- how the rulers and authorities that propped it up were doomed to fall. He pointed a finger at the police who were there to record his words: "You maybe powerful -- very powerful -- but you are not God. God cannot be mocked. You have already lost."

Then, in a moment of unbearable tension, the bishop seemed to soften. Coming out from behind the pulpit, he flashed that radiant Tutu smile and began to bounce up and down with glee. "Therefore, since you have already lost, we are inviting you to join the winning side."

The crowd roared, the police melted away and the people began to dance.

Don’t go away, Paul says. Make a stand. Put on your armour and dance. I am inviting you to join the winning side.

Trust in the power of God, put on his armour.