

Joining the Battle for God's Values: Peace, Justice and Unity

Sunday 23 July, 2017

A sermon preached by the Dean, the Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe.

As a child I was fascinated by the knights of old. I loved reading about the battles of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, or the quests of the heroes of antiquity. I read voraciously about the campaigns of Julius Caesar and his legions, in Germany, France and Britain, and with my mates would spend our summer holidays building elaborate camps in our gardens, or in the neighbours' paddock. We'd spend hours crafting scabbards and swords, helmets and shields. We never did much fighting, but set up a well organised watch, complete with watch tower (a couple of ladders leading to the lower rungs our cherry tree), and kept ourselves in readiness to deal with any incursions from the enemy – whoever they might be.

In today's second reading from the letter to the Ephesians, Paul sets before us the image of a knight or soldier dressed for battle. Just like I and my mates when I was nine, or the members of today's armed forces who put on protective gear, so the soldiers of Paul's time also had their special battle dress: a combination of defensive armour and arms, and offensive weapons. In order to fight for the values of God's kingdom, Paul tells us, we need to have the arms of the kingdom. In order to stand up for God's gifts of unity and peace we need to watch out for the enemy. This has been the central message of Paul's letter to the Ephesians which we have been studying these weeks. And today, in our last reflection on Paul's letter, our patron saint compares the striving for unity and peace with a battle for which we require all the gifts we can take on, for which we need God's special protection.

We make peace by breaking down the barriers that divide, Paul tells. And so in this struggle for peace we need to 'the whole armour of God, so that we may withstand'. The armour we are to take up leaves no part of our bodies unprotected: God gives us the 'belt of truth; to hold in place our uniforms; the harness of justice to protect our vital organs; the footwear of the gospel of peace as our foundation; the shield of faith to cover us against the hurled missiles or arrows of our opponents – 'the flaming arrows of the evil one'. God covers us with the helmet of salvation, cradling the place where we think, sense and see the world around us, where we make decisions. And finally, he gives us the sword of the Spirit – his Gospel, which has the power to transform our lives. With these weapons, we are equipped to enter into the struggle 'against the rulers, the authorities, the cosmic powers', Paul writes.

Paul suggests that the enemy we fight may well be inside us, rather than outside. The enemy we face, for which we are given this incredible armour, is 'not of flesh and blood', Paul knows. We often think that we as Christians are under siege – and for some Christians that certainly is true. The reality of the Christian communities in China, Syria and Iraq, Somalia and South Sudan, the Armenian-majority areas of Turkey and in the Gulf States is radically different from ours. For us, the enemy we fight is within us. We don't have a government that publicly condemns our faith in Australia. We are more likely to have Christians condemning one another in public. We don't live with the daily reality of genocide and torture in Victoria, either. We are more likely to encounter people who segregate or

denigrate others because of their race, gender or sexuality. We don't have secret police infiltrate our services or take down our names after worship at St Paul's Cathedral. Instead we are more likely to meet people who make us feel unwelcome or that we don't belong.

When faced with the powers that disrupt or destroy community, Paul says, we are to put on the armour of God and enter the battle to build up places where faith can grow. Throughout the letter to the Ephesians, Paul has told again and again of the vision that God has for this world. God wills for the world to be rid of oppression, evil and untruthfulness, so that goodness, peace and truth may flourish. And in order to promote that vision, he gives us instruments of trust and hope. He gives us a spiritual armour to defend us from self-centredness, self-doubt, and selfishness; gives us the uniform of grace, the armour of the battalions of prayer. With truth as a belt, and justice as a breastplate, with peace at our feet, and faith as our shield, with the knowledge that we are made right before God to cover our heads, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit and God's Word as our sword, we are well equipped to fight to build up communities where others may come to know God and his goodness.

Paul knows that a community can only grow and flourish where we work together. That is why he counsels the Ephesians to be 'strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power'. Do not rely on your own strength, Paul tells, for that strength will burn itself out. Rely instead on God's grace. Clothe yourselves in the good news that God has set us free from sin and death through Jesus Christ. Shield yourself with the assurance that life can be forever where God adopts us as his children. Ground yourselves in the good news that God has granted us the gift of peace: peace with him and peace with one another. Make unity your foundation, the shoes of our community, as it were, as the sign of the fruit of that peace. Take on the vision that God gives us as a shield against those who would want us to pursue narrow agendas and selfish interests. Remember that God's vision is for the entire created order – all people in all places, for all races and languages, for animals and trees, plants and waterfalls – and take on the harness of justice to work for that vision to come true. Above all, pray. Pray that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven, and pray that God would use you in the battle for that kingdom.

Paul tells the Ephesian church that all Christians are called to share in the fervent effort to pray and work for the kingdom: 'Pray in the Spirit at all times', he writes, 'in every prayer and supplication. Keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints'. Pray at all times, Paul tells, so that God's kingdom may come. Pray not only for yourselves, but pray for all the saints – the whole church – your fellows in the battle of faith. Pray for the strength to pray constantly. Pray for the strength to live faithfully. Pray for the grace to forgive others as we have been made right with God. Pray for the strength to speak up against untruth, to speak up for those who have no voice. Pray for the strength to do the works of justice, breaking down the barriers that divide us: the barriers in our churches and congregations, as well as the barriers that divide our society as a whole. Pray for the strength to battle those injustices that bring division, discord and conflict. Pray to be given grace to seek peace and pursue it, in a world that knows so little peace, so little justice.

Clothe yourself with the full armour of goodness to stand up for those things that build God's kingdom, Paul tells us. Be grounded in faith so that you may work for all that makes for peace. At the same time, Paul reminds us that we are not lone fighters, but part of a much larger campaign. God will direct the battalions of prayer, will lead you and me in the

work for justice, unity and peace. And that work, Paul tells the Ephesian Church, starts right here, in our own hearts. The armour God gives us is there to enable us to face the enemies within: doubt and despair, my lack of self-worth, my sense of entitlement, my fear of losing out or being overlooked, the temptation to tell a version of the truth that makes me look better, or my impulse to rely on my own strength rather than on God. Instead, Paul encourages us to clothe ourselves with truth, faith and peace. He tells us to harness justice and be enfolded with the knowledge that we are safe in God. He exhorts us to pray with hope and trust. And he assures us that God equips us with his rich gifts of grace for the struggle to let ourselves be transformed.

When I was a child I spent hours on watch, in my armour and shield, sitting on the makeshift watch tower in our cherry tree, watching out for enemies who never came to assail our camp. When I was a child I believed that our future would be one of peace, when people would just talk things through, preferably over a buttered pretzel and snag. I still believe that our future can be one of peace, and I still keep a watch out for the enemies of peace. Just as I was transformed from child to adult, so Paul tells us that we are to let ourselves to be transformed, so that this world may be conformed to God's vision. We are to change, so that the world may change. You may think that changing the world is impossible. But in the five years I have had the privilege of serving our Cathedral as Dean I have seen what can happen when people put on the armour of God and take up their arms – the gifts of faith and love – to fight for God's kingdom to come.

Our ministry of caring for those who come through these doors, exercised by a team of faithful weekday chaplains, brings healing and assurance to many, and enables some to lay down the burdens of despair, through confession and absolution. Our table-fellowship through our congregational lunches and morning teas has enabled us to hear about one another's challenges and joys of faithful living, and to come to know and include so many newcomers to our Cathedral. Our cry for justice for refugees, our righteous anger at the blight of offshore detention on our nation, has brought many refugees to share in our worship, come to faith, and become themselves a sign of transformation. Our shame at the scourge on our church of child abuse has led to a culture of greater awareness in this Cathedral. Every volunteer and staff member who comes in contact with children or vulnerable people now receives training to challenge inappropriate behaviour and report concerns, so that we not only know ourselves to be a safe and welcoming place, but are known to be a place of welcome and safety by the community around us.

Our commitment to reconciliation with our first Australians has led to the beginning of the slow process of listening and hearing stories of oppression, injustice and pain. Our work to break down structures that exclude has enabled young women and girls to join in the musical leadership of this Cathedral and to be ministers of the beauty of holiness. Our ministry of welcome to those from other cultural or ethnic backgrounds has led to the establishment of our designated Mandarin ministry which has seen many people of no faith at all turn to Christ. Our ministry of including and equipping every member of our congregations to explore what it is that God calls them to do in his name has added new faces to our server team, new members to our readers and intercessors, welcomers and hospitality group, and led to three people exploring vocations as lay ministers here. I give thanks for these signs of change, these signs of growing community.

God's vision for his world is to be at unity, so that peace may come to all. That unity is based on community. Here at St Paul's we are all invited to learn to share in the ministry of Jesus Christ with others: the armour of God is given us to join a battalion, not to become generals who fight lone stands. And it is when we join together, when we challenge the things that break down the unity that God wills for his people and instead take on the things that unite, that make us greater than ourselves, that we can begin to share in showing forth the signs of the reign of God in this place with others. The armour of God enables us to battle the temptation to go it alone, and teaches us that we can all grow together where we are greater than our parts.

Our Cathedral is changing. We will *all* change for good when we share together as people equipped with God's good gifts – his armour of grace – to fight for God's vision of unity and peace to be manifest here in this place. We will all change for good when we share in prayer and ministry together so that all of us may know the strength of God. We will all change for good when we share in facing the individual and corporate battles that confront us as believers and as a society. I pray that as a community of prayer and worship we all will take on the gifts of truth, justice, peace. I pray that we will deepen our faith and knowledge of salvation, and immerse ourselves in the life-giving Word of God. Above all, I pray that when we will let ourselves be equipped to be changed, transformed, we will be given grace to be one, so that the world may believe.

'Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen'.