

Not Against Flesh and Blood

Ephesians 6:10-20

Writing in his prison cell,
Bound by actual metal chains,
Hemmed in by actual metal bars
Watched by actual human guards
Injured by actual real whips,

Paul writes these remarkable words

“We do not wrestle against flesh and blood
But against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places
Against the cosmic powers over this present darkness”.

How can this be?

How can Paul say that things that hold him on the surface
Are not really the things that hold him.

Sometimes Paul uses the language of Power, and Authority,
To describe what seem to be very human institutions.

You see Paul sees the universe as a place
Where the human elides in the supernatural,
There is a power, invisible, and yet perceptible which animates, and sustains the conflicts
of this world.

All human conflict has a spiritual dimension

In fact Paul is saying that the spiritual dimension is the real animating force.

We evacuate the power of the spiritual too often from our language of conflict,
And if so we blind ourselves,
And do not perceive the full truth of what we encounter.

Spirituality of Conflict

Often the spirituality of conflict forces us to look at the full truth of what is going on in a conflict.

Let us look at Paul's list of the armour of God -

- Truth, Right relationship, Peace, Good news of Christ, Salvation.

It is not enough to look a conflict, and think who wears the badge "Christian" and those are the good guys

And the whoever doesn't wear the badge Christian and say "Those are the bad guys"

Rather we have to look at where truth is, right relationship, good news, Salvation.

So when in 1941, the German Army invaded the Soviet Union in Operation Barbarossa - coincidentally on the same date that Napoleon had invade Russia - the powers have a habit of repeating themselves - they believe that they are doing this in the name of Christianity - Barbarossa himself was a Holy Roman Emperor.

When the soldiers get to Russian villages, one of the things that they do is open the Church, because this is the Christians winning over the Communists. God is on the side of the Christians. How could God not be on the side of a Christian country against an Atheist country - after all God is like us and will always support the home team.

But for Paul, he would say - look below the language and the slogans,

To what is really going on

Enslavement

Violence

The language of purity being used to drive out alien races, including the Jews

Death

This is the what the power is doing,

It is the spiritual force of evil in the heavenly places motivating this

This has a spiritual dimension, in fact spirituality is the animating power

Or a situation must closer to home, and I have often spoken of the Church of Scotland and its national headquarters, because I care about it very deeply, and I have huge affection for its people.

In 2001, a friend of mine, Marjory MacLean was interviewed by a journalist, Harry Reid, for a book he was writing called "Outside Verdict" - he an outside journalist was writing a book about the Church of Scotland. And Marjory said of the headquarters:

“There is unfortunately a very wide diversity of ability amongst the Church’s professional servants, and an even wider diversity of graciousness. Institutional problems are holding us up, and we do have a lot of people who manufacture problems” (Outside Verdict, p 214)

Now what is stunning is that in our national headquarters, there have been numerous restructurings, all the people have changed, and yet if you had spoken to someone in the 1970s, or 2001 or 2022 they would have said something very similar. Too often the place crushes really good people, or brings out the worst, or fractures relationship.

Paul would said that there is a power, - an inward spiritual essence to the institution - yes even religious institution which animates, and if you want to reform, you have to engage with that spiritual reality.

“We do not wrestle against flesh and blood but against the rulers and authorities”

Or take Christian Nationalism - the idea that a nation’s identity, interests and power are closely related to God’s interests and power - and this takes root in every country. If you want to wage war, you need to get people to believe that the God’s are with you, and it is your duty in the name of God to impose God’s will on those people who do not believe in the same God as you.

This was obvious in Roman times, when the Emperor claimed to be God, and would use the phrase “Caesar is Lord”

For the Christians to say “Jesus is Lord” is to call into question this claim to supreme spiritual power. It is not to deny that Caesar has some spiritual power, if it were not a spiritual power he would have no power, but to say that his spiritual power is less than that of Christ, indeed, is subordinated to Christ.

I think that is something we are called to remember today on Remembrance Sunday. The Spiritual powers.

I am always struck by the times we have woken up to that in a bad way

For example when the Indian mutinies happened in the 19th Century,

In 1857 there was a national day of humiliation, in which people fasted and sought repentance, seeing the Indian mutiny as divine punishment.

I cannot think that we claim God's support when we oppress, enslave, take for economic benefit, all in the name of Christian culture. It is no different from Donald Trump standing in front of a Christian Church and holding a Bible.

Empires will always want to co-opt a religion, even if it is a Christian religion.

We want its power

Whether it is the Germans invading Russia

Or the British seeking to impose "peace" on India (and I know that our record in India is ambiguous and there were good aspects and the British on the whole were better colonisers than other nations, but still!).

And there is a power to this,

It is a spiritual power

It is not just a psychological projection and it is real.

There was another time when we engaged with this power,

And I think it was wholly legitimate

When the British Expeditionary Force was threatened with the elimination in May of 1940, following the German invasion of France and Belgium and the Netherlands,

The people of the country united to pray - under the direction of the King

There were queues outside Westminster Abbey

And there was a miracle, the German armies held back - the incredible decision as Heinz Guderian the German General referred to it as - and huge numbers more than ever were predicted were able to escape.

That I think is an example of engaging the powers.

I have already spoken to Chris Keble in action in the Falklands,

Praying and not knowing what to do,

And at Goose Green the Argentines making a quite unexpected surrender against a far smaller force.

There is always a spiritual power at work in conflict

The danger can be to overcome it, to claim it is only ours

Or the other danger can be to claim it is not there.

But everything is spiritual.

So the Catholic Bishop of Tigray, currently crying out for Christians to support and to pray, knows the spiritual dimension of this conflict.

It is to fully engage with the material

The raining down of shells

The siege of 700 days

And still to quote the Bible in this, that the work of the righteous will harvest peace

To pray and to struggle

To engage with all of this

To ask the international community to act

And to pray into the powers that they would act.

I think we also need to look at the powers at work in our own conflicts

And remember this principle again

“We do not wrestle against flesh and blood”

Where has the conflict been for you...

Where is the tension, where do you see a spiritual power, and essence at work?

Paul has three big instructions for us here...

The first is to be strong.

I like this.

Often in conflict our response is to cower or to be weak, and this means that we lash out, we go into a hunch, or we get our retaliation in first, or we bend any means at our disposal to try and win, including lies.

Instead we are told be strong in the Lord and in the Strength of this might.

Be strong.

Lift up your heads, straighten yourself, whatever it is that you are facing,

Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.

The second is to put on the armour, to cloth yourself with the things of God,

Which are like weapons, and defences here in the conflict in which you find yourself.

Remember these, and daily put them on

- the belt of truth around you
- the breastplate of righteousness

- As shoes for your feet, the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace
- In all circumstances take up the shield of faith with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one
- And take the helmet of salvation
- And the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God.

Place these things around, you and stand where you are - be resistant in your standing,
And let the day pass -

Paul calls this the evil day, it will not last forever

Use different kinds of weapons - these are not the weapons which undermine, or embitter,
or which poison, these are the weapons which lead to life.

And finally, to pray, and pray and pray

Whether we pray like those in Dunkirk

Whether we pray as we urged to for the Tigray

In all times and all places

With all prayer and supplication

Pray into the conflicts, pray into the tensions, pray into the places where the powers are at
work

And having done all

You will stand the gospel will be proclaimed

AMEN