

Spiritual defence

Ephesians 6:10-20

Just over three years ago, I preached pretty much the same sermon that I'm somewhat unashamedly about to preach again now. A sermon in response to spiritual attack. We dropped what we'd planned for the week, recognising that lots of people amongst us were feeling this sense of being attacked and brought down. And we're doing that again today.

When I looked back to that sermon, it started by noting the great things that were happening amongst us as a church - people investigating faith in Jesus, people actually giving their lives *to* Jesus, people getting baptised, people praying more, reading God's Word more. The kind of things that are happening again now.

Added to that, just now, our church has exciting new ventures to look forward to in the months and years ahead for reaching out to the people living here, and there is a sense amongst the leadership of a number of Inverness churches that God is unlocking something just now, opening up something significant, preparing us for a time when a lot of people are going to want to know how to follow Jesus, and we'll need to be ready for that.

Now this is exactly the kind of thing that makes Satan - the enemy of both God and humanity - want to lash out and drag us down. This is what gets described as 'spiritual attack.' It happens in the lives of individuals, especially when God does amazing things in them, like bringing them to faith in Him, or equipping them to do something significant for Him. But it also happens across the church, when God is on the move amongst us and through us.

And that's my reading of what's happening this week. I believe that God is doing something special here at St. Columba at the moment. And beyond that, He's doing something special here in Inverness just now. And I've seen this week, not least since the news we shared last week, the devil having a go at us.

It's happening in two areas in particular. It's happening in identity - in people's sense of who they are. And it's happening in relationships - stirring division amidst that which is united. Identity and relationships... If you're thinking, 'he's talking about me,' then you should know that it's not only you. It's others here too, including me. These are the repeated themes of what I'm hearing and seeing happening this last week or so, amongst all of us.

Ephesians 6:10 tells us to 'be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.' That is, stop trusting in your own strength to live life. *Depend on God to defend against the violent death throes of an already defeated devil.* The rest of the passage tells us how.

Following God's instruction in Ephesians 6:10-20 is not going to mean that no tragedy, moral dilemma, sickness or injustice will ever affect your life again. Putting on this armour won't stop you taking the hits - but it will mean that the devil won't knock you down.

And for all those who are still standing after a lifetime, it will mean seeing an eternal life where the devil is finally destroyed, and there *will be* no more tragedy, moral dilemma, sickness, injustice, tears, grief or death. We're given this armour so that we can stand in the battle until then.

Twice - in vv.11 and 13 - Paul instructs Christians in these young churches to 'put on the *full* armour of God.' If we're going to take our stand under the attacks we may face, we'd better suit up with *all* the kit that God has given us. There's some armour I'm going to focus on more today as we address the weak spots of identity and relationships that Satan's having a pop at us with. But we need to put all of the armour on, so I'll say something about each bit.

First of all, in v.14, we're called to buckle up a belt of truth. Commitment to what the Bible says about Jesus Christ being true is like a belt that holds life and faith together and in place.

Things happen to challenge that commitment. Tragedies make us wonder. Vocal opponents of faith make us wonder. Sometimes, the way Christians live makes us wonder. Perhaps more than anything else, just the narrative and worldview of our media, culture, education and the people all around us make us wonder.

Other assaults on your faith that we'll look at tend to be things that you don't struggle with in silence. When you drop a shield or find a hole in your breastplate, you'll tend to shout for help.

But when your belt slips enough, your trousers fall down! You're likely just to quietly slink away from the battle in embarrassment. Once you're off the field, you've got no inclination to return to the fight, because you think the whole fight is made up nonsense anyway.

That's why buckling up the belt of truth - being committed to believing that what Jesus said and did is true - is vital to standing up against the devil trying to knock down our faith in Jesus. A post-truth society might be leaving truth behind in the changing room, but it's the first thing that we're called to put on in this list of armour.

When you find that belt is slipping, you mustn't be embarrassed or afraid to talk about that with fellow Christians as well as with others. The ones who are honest about this experience tend to come through it all the stronger, with a better buckle. It's the ones who try to hide their doubts behind a mask who end up quietly leaving the battle, and aren't there when, as v.13 describes, God calls time and sees who's standing.

Also in v.14, we're told to put the breastplate of righteousness in place. This is one piece of armour that we need to focus on as the devil has a go at our *identities*.

What do you find your identity in?

We'll come back to the idea of what we find our identities in later on, but at this point, let's just note this: The good news of Jesus is that we can find our identity in belonging to Him. So what the devil tries to do is to tell us that we *don't* belong to Jesus. Here's where the breastplate comes in.

The breastplate covers the heart - a part of you that the devil will try to wound. He'll tell you lies like, 'God doesn't really love you.' 'You're not good enough for God.' 'You're not really a Christian.' He'll try to remind you of your past, and accuse you with it.

Some of us are struggling with the idea that we don't really belong, don't really fit in here, because we're not 'doing very well' - whether that means in our behaviour, our Bible reading, our church attendance, whatever.

But when you start thinking that way, do you know what happens? You don't get drawn to change your ways, read loads more Scripture, and be at church every single Sunday from here on in. You get drawn the other way.

The devil takes that wee thought - 'I'm not good enough' - and he uses that to drive you *away* from God further. He shoves you the way of, 'so there's no point trying,' and living life in increasing isolation from God and His people. He's trying this with some of you just now.

How do you defend against all that? God wants you to keep your life and identity in Him safe by covering your heart like a breastplate with this: God *gives* you righteousness. God *gives* you a right, innocent status before Him, free from accusation and guilt for the past - because of Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection for us.

Remind yourself, out loud if it helps - 'I am loved and welcomed, and I am right and innocent before God, because of Jesus Christ. Because He died for me, dealt with my sin, rose again...'

When you remember the cross; spend time reflecting on it, realise afresh what Jesus did for you there, do you know what happens? You start to *want* to live in a new way, *want* to read the Bible, *want* to come to worship Jesus. Not because you should, but because you *want* to! Because you wear it on your heart that you are free and forgiven - *that's* your identity in Christ.

In v.15, we're told to 'fit our feet with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.' Earlier in his letter, in 2:11-22, Paul had explained to the Ephesian churches what the peace is that God brings through the good news of Jesus Christ.

Have a look at that passage, and you'll find Paul talking about peace between God and human beings, when they believe in Jesus; and also peace between different human communities who used to be enemies, when they believe in Jesus. We need to fasten these sandals tight as the devil has a pop at our *relationships*.

When you become part of God's family in Christ Jesus, hostilities end and dividing barriers come down. There is reconciliation between God and sinners, old and young, different social classes, male and female, unionists and nationalists, leavers and remainers, prisoners and prosecutors, Presbyterians and Baptists, Protestants and Catholics.

The devil loves to attack by dividing what God has united. When disunity enters the church, the devil toys with us - and he can use it to create bitterness in individuals and the ruin of a beautiful Christian family.

What's happening amongst us just now is an attack on unity in our relationships. The devil is exploiting changes of circumstance to stir up arguments. These are situations where arguments aren't *inevitable*, but they are *possible*. And he is ensuring that the possibility for them is realised. It's

happening within homes and across friendships. Yes, I'm talking about you. No, I'm not *just* talking about you.

God says here, fit your feet in the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. Roman soldiers wore sandals that helped them stand firm, ready to move flexibly to hold the line together, but firm to hold ground without slipping. Scotland Rugby's marketing tagline is, 'As one.' It's the same idea that Maximus Decimus Meridius used in the film *Gladiator*. If you move and fight as one unit, you overcome. And to do *that*, you need to be able to move flexibly, but hold the ground without slipping.

So let's be flexible with one another, but firm in gospel unity together. The way to defend against the devil attacking us in disunity is to be flexible with one another. Of the issues that are leading to arguments between us - which of them really *matter*? How many of them could we simply let go and be flexible about? Even the things about which the outcome really does matter - does it matter more than the disunity between you?

Which things do we need to be ready to relinquish control and direction over, and be willing to move with the people we're living with and worshipping with, so that what matters more - our unity in the good news of peace between God and ourselves and peace between one another - holds intact?

Let's be deliberate about fostering peaceful relationships with fellow Christians, and with God. Readiness to move flexibly accompanies the good news of peace. We cannot hold together as one if there are immovable individuals in a church that is on the advance for the Kingdom of God.

Silent reflection: Who do I need to foster peaceful relationships with? What do I need to be ready to move flexibly on?

In v.16, God says, take up the shield of faith. The devil sometimes throws some really pointed, fiery stuff at us. It can take all sorts of different forms. God says, look out for this stuff, and lift a shield to it whenever you see it coming - a shield of faith. Lift up in your soul a declaration of loyalty to the King and trust in the Rescuer. Lift up a defiant cry of faith in Jesus. It won't stop the fiery arrows being hurled at you, but it will protect you from letting them wound your trust in God.

Tom Wright puts it like this: 'The arrows may take the form of doubt or despair; of adverse circumstances; of sharp temptation that will burn you up if you let it catch light on you; or personal tragedy; or indeed the kind of triumph

that tempts you to arrogance and pride. Believing loyalty will quench them all.'

Now to v.17, and the final piece of purely defensive equipment - a helmet. Something to put on your mind. This is another piece of kit to be very aware of putting on as the devil attacks us in the area of *identity*.

Who do you think you are? Where is your identity found? A good friend, who knows me well and has a gift about spiritual discernment, wrote a prayer for me on my birthday card last month (don't worry if you didn't know it was my birthday, I haven't a clue when yours are, either...)

She wrote in her prayer that I would find my identity first and foremost in being God's child. As I read it, I realised again how easy it is for me to find my identity in being 'the minister,' or, 'the one who does the preaching,' or, 'husband and daddy,' or a number of other things.

This week, I've been picking up from some of you that we're finding our identities in places other than, 'God's child thanks to Jesus.' Some of you are finding your identity in the role you've got at work... or home... or church. Some of you are finding it in a relationship with someone other than God.

Some of you are finding it in being 'the strong one.' Some of you are finding it in the promise of something new to come. Some of you are finding it in the memory of what used to be. Some of you are finding it in 'keeping busy,' a place where you can hide from questions about who you really are.

Here's the problem with where we've been finding our identities. Every one of these things can crumble. And none of them can bear the weight of defining our identities.

What happens if the role you have at work, home or church changes - whether by your choice or otherwise? Who are you then? What happens if the relationship you're rooting your identity in (that could be a romantic one, a family one or a friendship) - what happens if that relationship gets broken? Who are you then? What happens if you're 'the strong one,' but you can't be strong any more? Who are you then?

What happens if the new thing to come in your life never comes, or the reality of it turns out to be much different to your expectations about it? Who are you then? What happens when time marches by and you become further

and further removed from the memory that is defining you? Are you *diminishing*? Who are you then?

What happens when something forces you to stop being busy, and in the void, you ask yourself... 'who am I now?' Or worse, what happens when the busyness never stops, and you lose all sense of knowing who you are?

The devil gets to work in all this - because he drags you down when you lose your sense of identity as these things crumble. I've seen it in some of your eyes this week. More to his glee, as we're finding our identity in all of these different things, we're not 'as one' in the shared identity that God has actually given to each one of us in His family, and so the division sets in all the more. So here's how we defend ourselves...

'Take the helmet of salvation.' Put *salvation* on your mind. Day by day, put it on your mind that 'God has *saved* me. From sin, judgement, death and Hell. For life to the full, now and forever.' Put it on your mind, in a life-defining way, that this rescue Jesus has given you means that you are adopted as God's child, and get to call Him Father, today and forever after.

It's a humbling and sobering thing, I suppose - to allow what *someone else* has done be the thing that *defines you*. But that's the good news you're called to discover. That your life and identity is found in being rescued by Jesus. What my friend prayed for me in my card, let's pray for one another: That we would find our identity in this - 'I am a child of God because of what Jesus has done for me.'

If we start rooting our identities in that, we will not shrivel when those other things in our lives crumble. And the devil won't get to strike a blow that impairs us. Stuff will still hurt. But it won't diminish us.

Now, to the things that strike a blow against this awful enemy, the devil. v.17 tells us to take up '...the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.' The Spirit of God picks up the Bible and wields it as His chosen weapon.

God Himself wields His Word to do powerful things, like bringing dead men walking to life in Christ; and like wounding and wasting the most powerful enemy the world has ever seen. This book that keeps gathering dust on our shelves; the devil fears like a knife to the heart.

Those of you who were at the great Bible reading resource give away last week; how are you getting on with using what you took? If you've gotten

going, keep going! If you haven't gotten going, get going! You as an individual, and we as a church, will be better protected from the devil's attacks as we open our Bibles, read them, and live out what we're promised and commanded, and recall it during times of attack.

Well, that's the armour. A belt of truth - commit to the *truth* of the good news about Jesus Christ as what holds you together. A breastplate of righteousness - guard your heart from the devil's accusing lies by reminding yourself that you are right before God because of what *Jesus* has done for you. Gospel footwear of peace - let's move flexibly 'as one' together as a church, and foster peaceful relations between each other and with our God.

A shield of faith. When you see the stuff flying at you that really stings, lift up a defiant declaration of loyalty to and trust in Jesus Christ. A helmet of salvation - put it on your mind, and keep it there, that what defines you is 'I'm a child of God because Jesus has saved me.' And a sword that the Spirit of God uses - the Word of God. Read it, know it, train with it, and the Spirit of God who is resident in you will wound our enemy with it.

There's one more thing that God calls us to in this passage. v.18 tells us to pray in the Spirit, on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests, being alert, and praying for all the saints.

As a Christian, be alert, see what's going on in your life and others' lives, and pray all the time. Pray about big things and small things. Pray in church, pray in the car, pray in the classroom, the boardroom, and the utility room. Pray, pray, pray. And pray, especially, *for all the saints*. By praying for one another, we are 'as one.'

What Paul teaches Christians to pray for in his letter is this: That we will stand firm in our faith in Jesus, and that we will know Him more deeply today than we did yesterday. When we pray for *that* for one another, and as God says yes, people will become bold in proclaiming the gospel - which is just what Paul asks prayer for himself in v.19. People will become more like Jesus. Other people will come to faith in Jesus.

The church will grow - in Christlikeness, and in number. God's Kingdom will advance in power. The devil will kick and scream. Heaven will break in to Earth a little bit more. And God's name will be lifted a little bit higher. If I pray for you, and you pray for me - the children of God through faith in Christ, heading on together 'as one.'