

Sermon: PENTECOST 13, August 23, 2015

In the Name...

Some of you may know that for twelve years I served as an Army National Guard chaplain. And soon after I was commissioned I learned one of the hard lessons of being a chaplain and that was that nobody knew what to do with me - logistically, that is. All other soldiers were part of squads, platoons, companies, etc. and travelled in assigned Humvees or trucks where they could store their equipment, but, for many years, Guard chaplains did not have their own vehicles. I had to carry all my gear with me all the time and hitch rides with other soldiers whenever I could. So the first lesson I learned was "travel light." The second was "freeze at night."

This morning we have heard St. Paul talk about what he calls "the whole armour of God." The equipment which he feels is necessary for each Christian to carry into spiritual combat. The belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of the Gospel, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, the sword of the Spirit. Very descriptive. But, what are these things and how do we use them?

First, the belt of truth. Today we'd call it the LBE - load bearing equipment. It's the belt and shoulder straps where we attach ammo pouches, canteens, flashlight, first-aid pack, etc., - whatever we need for a particular mission. It goes over the uniform and frees up the soldier's hands. The image is that having the truth in our hearts allows us to adapt what we bring to different situations and focus on the work at hand.

As for the breastplate of righteousness, it's like the body armour vest to guard the vital organs, heart, lungs, stomach, etc. The point of this image is that righteousness protects our physical bodies from spiritual injury. That is, when we wear righteousness, our bodies are under protection and under control. Our physical passions can be directed toward serving God and not the flesh.

Now, shoes, boots, are a very important part of the soldiers' equipment. The Romans put a lot of effort into the design and care of military boots for good reason. Boots give the stability of sure footing. With the boots of the Gospel we can march over the rough terrain of life, mountain passes of pain, and deserts of fear. And that's why they are called boots of the Gospel of peace, because peace is the goal of our marching. Peace is the goal of our battles.

Now, the shield of faith. Faith is more than having a right set of beliefs, it's about living in obedience to God as any good soldier lives in obedience to his or her commander. Just look in the Bible where the word "faith" is mentioned and substitute the word "obedience" and you will be surprised how smoothly the sentences flow.

The Roman shield was also carefully designed. It was designed not just to deflect blows, but, it had a metal edge which could be used for hitting back and its leather cover could absorb flaming arrows without catching fire. That's why St. Paul says that the shield of faith can "quench all the fiery darts of the evil one." Obedience to God, then, is our shield - both a defence and a weapon.

And, then, we have the helmet of salvation. A head injury is one of the most dangerous a soldier can receive and even today, every soldier, even chaplains and doctors, are issued with a Kevlar helmet. We can survive wounds to the body, even the loss of a limb, but, the loss of our head can really spoil our whole day.

Helmets also serve for recognition. Each country designs its helmets differently. And UN troops on peace-keeping missions wear bright blue helmets. Why? For instant recognition that they are different from others. We need to wear our salvation where it can be seen to mark us out as different. Too many Christians put their helmets away so that they don't look so obvious and then suffer head injuries in life's battles.

And finally, and it is interesting that it comes only now at the end of the list, that we mention the sword, the sword of the Spirit. Elsewhere in Scripture, the sword image is used of Scripture as in Hebrews, "the Word of God is sharper than any two-edged sword", but, and this is important, it takes training to know how to use a sword.

You see, the Bible in the hands of an untrained person is more dangerous than an M-16 in the hands of a child. That's why there are a lot of cut-up, slashed, and bleeding people in this world who have been the victims of the Word in untrained hands. Casualties of friendly fire. That's why this comes last. Only when you have your LBE of truth, body armour of righteousness, boots of peace, obedience of faith, and Kevlar of salvation, that are you given the M-16 of the Spirit.

The whole armour of God. The battlefields of life are strewn with the bodies of people who never learned how to wear the uniform or use the weapons.

Now, Joshua was a man who knew about arms and armour. Not a patriarch like Abraham, nor a prophet like Moses, he was a warrior. He not only wore and used his uniform and weapons, he wore his spiritual armour every day and it gave him the moral strength to match his military skill.

But, as we heard in our Old Testament lesson, when Joshua was an old man and near death, his wars had ended, the country was resting in peace and prosperity and it was in this context he called the elders, the judges, the leaders of the Twelve Tribes, together at Shechem.

Over the years, he had asked his people to follow him into battle, time and time again, and now, he asks them to follow him one last time. He asks the people to choose which god they will serve. The God of their ancestors or the new gods of the new land they now inhabit. He declares his own choice. He will follow the God of his Fathers. And as the people respond, "we too will serve the Lord", he wins his final battle.

We have been given the same arms and armour as Joshua, but, it doesn't do us any good if we leave them in the supply room. So many people depend on their own moral strength, their high ideals and wisdom, their personal commitment to justice to get them through life and when confronted or ambushed by the Evil One they find themselves unable to fight back. Sometimes they manage to win a battle, temptations are resisted, sin is overcome, injustice is exposed, but, often those victories come at an unacceptable cost to themselves or others.

So, let's lay out and inspect everything we've been issued. It's the best the universe has to offer and it's meant to be used. For, as St. Paul says, "our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against...the cosmic powers of this present darkness." So, properly armed, let us "Make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel."

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