

Address: Ann Robinson (Reader)

It has been said that the passage we have just heard Martin read is a gift to preachers but I'm not so sure! It certainly has much food for thought in it but that in itself presents a problem. Paul's letter to the Ephesians is sometimes called the 'Queen of the epistles' and is regarded very highly in Christian theology. It was probably a sort of round robin as it is very impersonal. It was written when Paul was in prison and would be chained to a Roman soldier so the picture of the armour would be very present to him.

So let's spend a few moments looking at the armour which Paul uses in the fight against evil, not something we are very good at thinking about. When Plato was accused of certain crimes he said, "Well then, we must live in such a way as to prove that his accusations are a lie." God has given us the equipment to use in the spiritual fight.

The belt of a soldier kept the armour in place and protected the kidneys and the soldier could move freely. The breastplate covered the heart and lungs and the shoes protected the feet as sometimes the enemy would scatter nails. The word Paul uses for the shield is for the large shield used by a heavily armed warrior to protect from the fiery dart. The helmet protects the head and the sword is the only offensive part mentioned.

Paul uses this picture of a heavily protected warrior as an analogy for how we need to fight against what is wrong. The belt is likened to truth and sometimes it is hard to face what is right and true.

The gospel is true and we must always remember that that is what holds everything else together. The breastplate of justice shows that we need to guard our hearts from unworthy thoughts which so easily creep into our minds. And also remember that God is our judge and sent his Son to save us from all the wrongs that we do. The shoes are so that we can go out and proclaim the gospel of peace, a sign that we are ready to go out for our Lord.

Only through Christ can we find the peace which passes all understanding. The shield of faith which is to guard against that terrible doubt which can attack the most faithful of people. Mother Theresa suffered extreme doubt at times. There are so many things which encourage doubt and we must fight them and remain loyal to our Saviour. The helmet of salvation which protects our mind from false knowledge and finally the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God, to use against all comers. Everything that the authorities thought had been overturned by the resurrection and it is that which overturns our lives.

This passage ends with Paul speaking about prayer. "Pray on every occasion in the Spirit, with every type of prayer and intercession....and also for me". Paul says that he is an "ambassador in chains". An ambassador should be free to give the messages of the ruler and yet even in shackles, Paul will not be silent about his Saviour.

One of the points which is covered in the current confirmation class is ministry, what it is and how our ministry fits with what Christ calls us to do. But it is hard to do something if we don't know what it is and so often we do not listen to God speaking to us. We can bombard him with words but listening is a different matter! But we need the prayers of others. Archbishop William Temple declared that whatever else one might say about whether prayer worked, he had noticed that when he prayed "coincidences" happened and when he stopped praying the "coincidences" stopped happening. Prayer is important and shouldn't be rushed or simply reduced to a few moments before we go to sleep.

In 2008 a survey showed that 75-97% of Americans claimed that they prayed at least once a week and 57% one or more times a day. When there is a tragedy people will flock to the church and be lead in prayer. Many times we hear "You are in my thoughts and prayers". But prayer is difficult and perhaps we can only learn

to pray with God's help. A book on prayer which is very readable is 'When I pray, what does God do?' by David Wilkinson who is an astrophysicist as well as a theologian.

God gives us all the equipment we need but without his help we are weak. Are we willing to use what he gives us and learn to know him better and follow his will for us? And continue to spread his word regardless of the circumstances in which we find ourselves?