

Sermon for Choral Evensong – Lent 3

Old Testament: Joshua 1.1-9

New Testament: Ephesians 6.20-120

I wonder what armour you put on...

Maybe it's the armour of success and perfection; stopping anyone from seeing your failings and weaknesses...

Maybe it's the armour of independence; hiding from everyone your very real loneliness...

Maybe it's the armour of wealth; so no-one knows how vulnerable you feel...

Maybe, in this time, it's the gauntlets of a thick layer of hand sanitizer...

Or the self-defensive shield of one hundred stock-piled toilet rolls?

Maybe it's the emotional armour of gallows humour, or the protective knowledge of 24-hour rolling news...

I wonder what armour you're putting on...

Well, at the moment there is no escaping that we stand on the brink of a health crisis and, in many ways, whatever armour we are putting on is entirely natural... we're scared, and when we're scared putting on armour seems a good thing...

And we're scared because everything is unknown; because we can see the situation in places such as Italy and Spain getting worse, and we wonder if, when, we're headed for the same.

And we're scared because, with sometimes conflicting advice, we don't know what is the best course of action,... or inaction..., self-isolation or getting on with daily life...

And we're scared because we're asking very real questions about how we will feed our families if we're in quarantine and the supermarket shelves are empty, and if our jobs will be safe if the economy takes a nose dive.....

Ultimately, we are scared about death; or perhaps even more, about the death of our loved ones...

We're scared of what's happening and the real enemy we're scared of isn't even visible. It's a virus that's only about 100 nanometres in size (that's about one ten thousandth of a millimetre). And when you can't see the enemy, we can be tempted to make other things into the enemy.. The person you see coughing on the bus, the family down the road who recently came back from their Italian skiing trip, the man whose just taken the last packet of toilet roll in the Supermarket...

Well, in the face of fear, tonight we are offered readings of hope, which give us a very real alternative to the me-first ideology that might be tempted to creep in at times such as this and which both point us to the kind of armour we need to be putting on.

The author of the letter to the Ephesians (which may or may not be Paul), is writing to the Church (debatably the one in Ephesus) which is under pressure. They are under threat of powerful influences (both natural and supernatural; those seen and unseen) and the author wants them to know the power of Christ dwelling within them and the strength that God has provided them with to stand firm. The author wants them to know that, whatever they are facing, they have weapons they can rely on... weapons of the spirit; enabling them to be fearless in living out their Christian calling.

And we have those weapons too. And though it's important to take precautions, we need to make sure we're putting on the right kind armour; arming ourselves with those spiritual weapons that we have at our disposal.

Because, like the Ephesians, we each of us have a belt of truth which we can fasten around our waist. Helping us to look at the situation and look past panic. Helping us to not to slip into a culture of blame or demonisation of others and challenging us to stop spreading seeds of fear.

We each can choose to strap a breastplate of righteousness to our chest, reminding us to continue to follow God's commandments and to live lives that are honourable to God, whatever the situation we are in.

With those breastplates firmly in place, we can ask, what do those commandments look like now? Might the commandment not to steal, challenge us not to panic buy or hoard food, when we know that those who are poorer or more vulnerable than us won't have that same freedom. We have probably each already seen real examples of people confused and upset in supermarkets because they can't buy the things they need now, because others have stockpiled. So, as we go about the next few weeks and months, let us keep arming ourselves with that breastplate when we need to make difficult choices, so, as Joshua says to the people we are "careful to act in accordance with all the law... not turn(ing) from it to the right hand or to the left"¹.

And for the shoes on our feet, we too can put on whatever will make us ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. We can stop ourselves building up walls and arming ourselves against the world, and instead draw closer to those in our communities... Because, in times of fear, the people around us need love and support and peace and we, as a people of hope, are some of the best placed to give that; whether face to face, or by phone calls, or emails or by what we're saying on social media.

Now is the time for us each take up our shields of faith, our helmets of salvation, and our swords of the Spirit. And when we are tempted to panic and fear and despair, we can make a conscious choice to turn to prayer and scripture to comfort and reassure us.

¹ Joshua 1.7

Because there really is, so much comfort we can draw on...

We can read God's words to Joshua, when he had to assume responsibility for the whole of the Israelite people after Moses, the man who had led them for a generation, died;

"Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."²

We can read the words of the psalmist, David, when he was seized by the Philistines in Gath;

"O Most High, when I am afraid,
I put my trust in you.
In God, whose word I praise,
in God I trust; I am not afraid;
what can flesh do to me?"³

We can read the words of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, speaking words of comfort to his disciples, who are scared about what the future will hold;

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."⁴

And we can commit ourselves, as the letter to the Ephesians challenges us, to "Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication."⁵

This spiritual armour is there, ready for each of us to put on now. Not so that we can go out to battle against this invisible enemy, but in order that we can stand firm. In order that we can stay faithful to God and live as Christian examples in our communities when we ourselves are anxious and concerned. We have this armour to put on and it is comfort and a defence, as we continue on a very different Lenten journey than we might have been expecting.

Let us pray:

"Loving God,
Source of healing and comfort,
At this time of fear, fill us with your grace;
That the sick may be made whole,
The virus contained and a cure be found
Strengthen those who care for the sick,
Calm the anxious and protect the most vulnerable
In the power of the spirit and in faith of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen"⁶

² Joshua 1.9

³ Psalm 56.3-4

⁴ John 14.27

⁵ Ephesians 6.18

⁶ Prayer slightly adapted from a facebook post by John Francis Friendship