

Sermon Notes for Trinity XXI

“put on the whole armour of God” (Epistle)

We know of the Charles Wesley hymn “Soldiers of Christ arise”, though few of us have sung the entire three parts of it (modern hymn books cut out most of it) complete with “Indissolubly joined” as we did at Letchworth recently. So the epistle *can* be used as a basis for Christian spirituality. But it does not come naturally to the modern mind. I doubt Paul was militaristic, nor did he live in a militarised society. Tarsus was hardly a frontier town; Judea had only a small garrison; the civil wars were two generations in the past and the Jewish revolts some time in the future. The military metaphors are more literary than experienced – this is neither legionary equipment nor auxiliary. It has more to do with the parade ground than battle.

But we do not read Paul for details of the Roman army, but for spiritual truths. There is a war; we have enemies. Christianity does not promise a comfortable life. The traditional list, derived from scripture, is “the world, the flesh and the devil”. Perhaps the devil is behind the distortions of the world and the flesh. But no harm can come from taking the three separately; if the world or the flesh will ruin somebody anyway, why should the devil bother to add to the process?

The risk with the fighting metaphor is that, particularly for those without direct experience, it seems a short-term stance. From my late father's reminiscences, not so. Military service even close to the front line is mainly waiting vigilantly. We must be ready to resist the next attack, and we do not know whence or when it will come. (It is comparatively rare to be actively attacking.) Hence so much of Paul's imagery is about *defensive* equipment and the need to use it well. True, Christianity is not just about defending oneself against attack. There is more to following Christ than years of resisting “the manifold temptations”.

The world is an insidious enemy (perhaps most for those of us in employment). It may be defined as people getting on with life without God. Behind it indeed there may be more sinister semi-personal forces such as Mammon (not to be translated money!) The world is unavoidable. We have to live in the world (Paul does not advise disengagement even if it were possible). It does not wholly lack the goodness of God's original purposes. But at best it drags us down to a lower standard. Perhaps not enough to damn us; but be careful! We are called to God's perfection, and all falling short of that is of the nature of sin.

The flesh is not (needless to say) just sex. Those little tempted that way may be caught just as well by gluttony, whether of quantity or of exquisite taste. Or by any other bodily (or mental) feature of our nature. Now God made the fleshy delights; just as the devil cannot produce a virtue, so I doubt he can produce a genuine delight, only a parody of it. Christians are not forbidden ever to feast or to experience the natural delight in good food and drink; for the Son of Man came eating and drinking. It is not for his “good things” that Dives is in torment. But there is a time for fasting as well, and an awareness of the needs of others. (I am sure incidentally that the devil while delighted at human misery is horrified at the many - mostly Christian - food banks which respond to it. How much more if the handouts included luxuries as well as all the necessities?)

And then there is the devil. We must be careful. Jesus never said that *all* our problems are of diabolical origin, but he behaved on the basis that *some* were (and some were not). There are some believers who find the devil in too many situations, and others who reject the very idea. We do have to cope with the world and the flesh anyway, but sometimes there may be more behind it, a particular malevolence which is more than mere evil. What would anyway because of the fall be a serious problem (and Articles point out that “this infection of nature doth remain yea in them that are regenerate”) may be made worse. The wise Christian will not reject the possibility. Paul indeed suggests here that world and flesh are used by the devil as part of his revolt against God. Mythology, certainly. But consecrated mythology accepted by Jesus and all the New Testament writers in their different ways. If we think we are wiser, then there is no authority for the fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man either.

Paul's point, as I said earlier, is not just defensive. Yes, be aware of what we face. But his positive instruction is to pray – and specifically to pray for himself as the typical Christian missionary. (He does not demand that all Christians be missionaries, incidentally.) For it is the proclaimed gospel which the devil most hates and attacks; and the freedom of proclamation is under threat (for whatever the government dislikes, such as Christian moral truths, must be “extremist”).

The readings are those of the Sunday in the Prayer Book.