

Proper 16, Trinity 11, 2009, Year B

Epistle: Ephesians 6: 10-20

Psalm 34: 15-22.

Gospel: John 6: 56-69

Many church people are uncomfortable with the military images of today's epistle, and some of the hymns we're already sung. One of the regrettable features of the hymn book is that some of them have been edited out ...

But we can't escape them. They are there in the liturgy: Holy Holy Holy, Hosts, might, sabaoth, armies of God.

The Great Commission at the end of St Matthew's Gospel calls us to make disciples of all the world, and if you interpret that literally, it implies the use of force and coercion. That is how it was interpreted by the crusaders and by many missionaries of the last two hundred years: food in exchange for baptism, signing on the dotted line, and being governed by the Brits.

Paul also uses military language in this well known passage, so it's worth looking at.

Until the Romans became a world power, for the ordinary Roman citizen being a soldier meant stepping up to be counted in a national or local emergency, like today's special police; or living it up as a royal guard with lots of ceremony, good living and maybe some fighting in the event of a coup; or beating up other people as a mercenary or an adventurer.

Then the Romans created a full-time professional army. Soldiers were trained to defend their country's frontiers, garrison the towns, patrol the trouble spots, uphold the law and the authority of the emperor, and keep the peace. By St Paul's time, the main function of the Roman army was to defend and to protect (though whether those defended and protected saw it in the same light is another matter). And St Paul, as in today's Epistle, clearly sees the Roman soldier as a model for Christians.

It's not surprising that St Paul's images of the whole armour of God as equipment for Christian living have become familiar, since all baptised Christians are signed up for full-time service. The baptism service makes this clear: ***Fight valiantly as a disciple of Christ against sin, the world and the devil, and remain faithful to Christ to the end of thy life.***

Then as now a soldier's life was full of uncertainty. For in spite of TV adverts and the news from Afghanistan, being a soldier is not all about adrenaline-fuelled action, with all guns blazing. Much of the time is spent planning, preparing, waiting, and hoping the Commander in Chief has got the correct view of the situation. For much of the time apprehension and expectation go hand in hand.

As in many things, *being prepared* is the key; equipment must be up to scratch, physical and mental fitness are prerequisites. Hence all the spit and polish, hence the drill, the exercises, the manoeuvres in the field; all these things have to be kept going whenever opportunity offers.

Similarly, following his description of the Christian's vital equipment, St Paul goes on to speak of the way Christians should prepare for anything that might come. And the Christians' preparation for what St Paul calls spiritual warfare, for service, and for life itself is prayer – *persistent* prayer and *opportunistic* prayer.

Persistent does not mean doing nothing but pray, nor does it mean nagging at God like a small toddler who won't take no for an answer. Rather it means not giving up, trying the number again when you can't get through the first time or the second time, when the number seems always engaged or out of order. It means keeping on trying to make the contact or to keep the contact.

Opportunistic does not mean praying just when you feel like it, or at some time of emergency or crisis; it means using time; life itself even, with common sense. The soldier who before the battle of Edgehill in the Civil War had it right when he prayed: "Lord, thou knowest how busy I must be this day; if I forget thee, do not thou forget me"

While we're on the subject of negative aspects to prayer, perhaps it is worth adding that prayer is not asking God for things to suit our wants rather than our needs – like the small boy anxious to do well in his geography exam who asked God to make Paris the capital of Belgium. Nor is prayer a means of, or an excuse for dumping our problems on God. We are right in our intercessions to bring our anxieties and concerns to the Divine; but from then on, the responsibilities are ours to do something about them:

action is demanded. As the Beatles sang in a different context, "WE can work it out"; our commander in chief wants us to understand His battle plan. Prayer unlocks God's purpose in us. We must work.

Prayer and preparation are different on different occasions for different people. Public worship is different from private prayer for example, just as the regimental exercise is different from the work-out in the gym. No-one should presume to tell other people the right way to pray, because there isn't one way that suits all. What there is, though, is the tradition of the church in the daily offices: discipline—the equivalent of the soldier's drill.

The armour of God: defence or offence?

Prayer: defence or offence?

belt of truth and purity: girdle

breastplate of righteousness

shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. helmet of salvation: amice

sword of the Spirit

Te Deum – it has praise, thanksgiving, a creed and a final prayer for God's mercy. It will always be heard wherever I am vicar.

Psalms, where hearts are opened to God with a freedom of speech we are often ashamed to acknowledge.

But when it comes down to it, prayer is simply getting and keeping in touch with God. It's a two way thing; the image of the telephone occurs again when Michel Quoist writes:

"I have just hung up; why did he telephone? I don't know; oh I get it. I talked a lot and listened very little. Forgive me, Lord, it was a monologue and not a dialogue. I explained my idea but didn't get yours. Since I didn't listen, I learned nothing. Since I didn't listen, I didn't help. Since I didn't listen we didn't communicate. Forgive me Lord, for we were connected, and now we are cut off"

Michael Ramsey.

All can be prayer.

Lord, thou knowest how busy I must be this day. If I forget thee, do not thou forget me.