

Battling against what?

Ephesians 6.10-20

Singing hymns about being soldiers is not so popular these days, but we still do it. We listen to the epistle which tells us to put the armour of God without feeling particularly uncomfortable and alienated from that picture language. But I wonder what it is that we think we are fighting. Let me offer you two possible explanations which are commonly held, but which ultimately I think are not good enough, and one which points the way beyond them.

Sometimes people make the whole thing very spiritual. And there is no doubt at all that the writer of these words had a strong element of this about him. That is to say, he was living in a world which imagined itself to be surrounded by all sorts of evil spirits and forces, which had to be dealt with, and were ignored at your peril. So there certainly was an element of this purely spiritual battle - the forces of Jesus v. the forces of the Devil, if you like - the great cosmic battle which Christ had won with his battle with Satan in the temptations, and especially on the Cross. We cannot ignore the truth behind this thinking, although today it is unlikely that we are feeling the same way about spiritual forces as the original readers were. I have little doubt that there *are* such forces, and what dealings I have had with people who have been misguided enough to dabble in the occult only reinforces the view that we cannot simply laugh it all off. That is for real, and we cannot ignore it. But on the other hand, this is not the everyday experience of most of us, and that kind of spiritual battle is rare. The Epistle seems to imply that this is an ongoing everyday thing for everyone. So although there is truth in this idea of the spiritual battle it can't be the complete story.

The second way people get into this idea of being soldiers wearing armour, is to make it a specific battle - to narrow down the battle to some particular manifestation of evil as they see it, and crusade against that. So we can look back in history of not so long ago, and see for instance the great Christian battle against the demon drink as a place for warfare. And of course the Sally Army, which of all parts of the church is most used to this military language, began partly to cope with this battle against the demon drink. There was a real problem to be faced at that moment of history, and great evil was coming from abuse of alcohol. It did need a specific battle, there is no doubt. But like anything else, it could get out of proportion. People were put in the position of being unable to have a drink at all if they called themselves Christians. All the world's evil, as it were, was centred on this one activity.

Now that is a very dubious way of going about things. Jesus never condemned alcohol. The vine indeed was one of the ancient symbols of Israel, and Jesus took it up himself - I am the true vine. He told us to take wine to be his blood to drink it in remembrance of him. That is what we come to do each week in church. But there was a drink problem a hundred years ago. There is still a drink problem now - and we need a lot of Christian support in preventing the abuse of alcohol from causing the misery that it has done all through the ages in a certain number of people. But the problem really is addiction, not alcohol in itself

I have no doubt that part of our battle is coping with a particular evil, but it cannot be the whole war - it is one skirmish. You can find lots of other obsessions which people have had through the years - where the whole of the world's evil is narrowed down to some particular thing which sums it all up for the individual -

the demon drink, the nuclear threat, the permissive society, - there we will find Christian campaigners. And who is to say that they are wrong - there is always some truth in these movements. They may be fighting part of the battle. But when all that is evil is narrowed down to one thing - then we must be warned that things have got out of proportion- and this is not what the writer to the Ephesians intended, and was not the intention of the hymn writers whose words we use. The prime, and almost accepted example of this is the use of the word 'sin'. In the popular use of the word - but I hope not in yours and mine - sin usually means 'sexual sin'. We use phrases like 'living in sin' - and film titles often include the word in a very narrow sense indeed. That isn't what the Bible means by the word - although sexual failures may well be one result of sin. Somehow, we have let the word become twisted out of its proper and fuller leaning by people who have had this one obsession - that this was the only kind of wickedness that mattered. We are seeing at the moment with those who are obsessed with the rights and wrongs of same sex relationship. So - if the purely spiritual battle against unseen forces won't fill the bill completely, and if specific campaigns against pet hates won't fill the bill completely, then what is the battle we are involved in - what do we need the armour for?

I want to do that terrible thing that we so often forget to do - to put the words we have heard about getting armed to the teeth in context. It comes right at the end of the letter to the Ephesians. But hopefully some of you at least will have been studying the whole of the letter, and will have seen what has led up to it. What are the evils that the writer has been talking about in these few pages? Yes, he talks about the spiritual forces that are at work. But then he goes on to talk about how Christ has delivered the Ephesians from their own worst nature. He talks about the evil of racial feuding between Jews and Greeks. He talks about the evil of people being irresponsible as believers, saying they believe, but not thinking deeply enough about it to be able to stand their ground when people lead them astray - the evil of half-heartedness. He amplifies this by slating them for being people who lie, who are wrongly angry, who steal, who use foul talk, who hold grudges, who lose their tempers, who are spiteful. True he does slate them for sexual irresponsibility, and for drunkenness, but only as part of this total list. They are not the be-all and end-all. He talks about the need for Christian standards in business and family life, in social behaviour. It is so wide-ranging it is almost breathtaking. And *then* he says Put God's armour on...and so on.

So the fight is total - it is about our whole way of life. We are fighting the good fight whether we are at home or at work, whether we are in church or in a shop. We are fighting it whether we are on our own or in a crowd. There is no time off. Because what we are fighting is the world's evil - and that will be found in every place we go - because no-where, not even the church, is a sin-free place. And as the writer knew perfectly well, even on his own, he had to deal with the evil within him. I wonder where you will have met evil this week?

Yes, on the world scale we can see evil in the arms race, in racial tensions, in power struggles, in unions and management disputes, in parliament and so on. But we can also find it closer home...and indeed *in* our homes. The old joke about having 'Fight the good fight' as a wedding hymn is not really funny - because it is probably in our homes where the evil is most insidious, and where an awful lot of the battle has to go on.

Don't get too spiritual - although that is part of it. Don't get too incensed about one particular thing - however justified that may be. It is the battle for God's world that we are fighting - and that is a big place. As we have been reminded, it isn't easy to fight. We may well get some hurts as we go along. But the fight

isn't ultimately ours - it is God's fight to be God in God's world. For light - the Light of Christ - to come, darkness must go. For good to come, evil must go. But on the Cross, the victory is won. That is the sign of victory - the empty cross which tells us that Jesus couldn't be defeated by the worst evil that men could throw at him. So the Cross remains, as it was to the Emperor Constantine our vision - and the message is to us as it was to him - 'In this sign conquer.'