25 August 2024 Sermon preached at the Benefice Service in Charlton on Otmoor by Brian Mountford

St Paul has some startling images. For example, the Body of Christ; the idea that the combined membership of the Church represents the presence of Christ on earth.

For many years, Roger Bannister, the first man to run a mile in under four minutes, was a member of my congregation. We used to tease him with Paul’s picture of Christian discipleship being like a running race – ‘run the race that is set before you’. As we sung in the hymn: run the straight race of God’s good grace.

Another image: as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive – set so movingly in Handel’s Messiah.

And today we have *the whole armour of God*.

I’ve always thought the whole armour of God was Paul’s own brilliant literary invention. But it turns out not so. As so often in New Testament passages, they are influenced and shaped by the Jewish scriptures. In Isaiah 59, there is a passage about a Redeemer for the Jews:

‘For He put on righteousness as a breastplate, And a helmet of salvation on His head;

He put on the garments of vengeance for clothing, And was clad with zeal as a cloak’.

And in Isaiah 52:7 we read, ‘How beautiful upon the mountains

Are the feet of him who brings good news, Who proclaims peace.’

When I started thinking about the image of the whole armour of God it seemed a straightforward image. And gradually became more and more complicated. It’s a military image. Why should Paul use this? Wasn’t Jesus a pacifist? Love your enemy?

Yes, but First Century Palestine was a military environment. In Jerusalem there were armed soldiers on the streets. They could force a person to carry their kit for a mile. Matthew 5.41 ‘If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile’.

In Paul’s missionary days 25 years later, the Roman Empire was very effectively policed by soldiers in every city. Their armour was sophisticated for its time. E.g. great attention was paid to comfortable shoes, because a soldier who could not happily march or for whom every step in battle was an agony is not an effective soldier.

But Jesus *was* a peaceful man. When he enters the gates of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, he rides not on a horse but a donkey. The messiah came not as a soldier, or freedom fighter, but as a man of peace.

I don’t want an image of military might to be a big Christian theme for the gospel. For many, the Crusades put an end to that, when in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Christians in armour fought the Muslims for the holy sites in Jerusalem, often with great cruelty and viciousness.

I want to say about the present day: When armies deploy ballistic missiles, drones, and crush people beneath the rubble of falling buildings, this is not the armour of God…

When soldiers use torture – e.g. Gazan captives being stripped naked, forced to crouch on the ground, then having metal bars shoved into their bottoms, this is not the armour of God – even if, in the case of Israel they believe God has given them their ‘Promised Land’. Or in the case of Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church has given its blessing to the war, this is not the armour of God. Something is badly wrong when religions are made to justify what is clearly evil and a violation of human rights, and the most cherished morals principles of history.

Paul’s Whole armour of God speech broadly supports Jesus’ pacifist approach. But it is also an image for fighting the good fight. Being a salvation army. Standing up for one’s faith, taking up arms in the cause of goodness and peace. The sword of the spirit is not merely a weapon of defence but a weapon of attack.

What is the Sword of the Spirit for us in an interregnum where most of our parishes are a bit worried about their future?

Doing what we do well. Doing ordinary mundane things. Clean Church. Emphasise what is beautiful. People who look to church are looking for something serious, not naff. *(At this point, Brian asked whether ‘naff’ was a word he ought to use from the pulpit. Then said he had heard Lisa Holmes use it quite often, so it must be okay.)*

Welcome those who turn to church for births marriages and deaths.

Recognise that welcome does not mean Join our Club. You’re welcome if you do as we do. For example, wanting young people to join our churches, but only if they behave as we want them to. Welcoming requires some sacrifice on our part, some self-giving. Besides, we are so set in our ways, there are things for us to learn about adaptation and change.

Recognise that many people struggle to make sense of Christian beliefs:

Baptism – being reborn in Christ. What does that mean?

Marriage – the whole sexual ethics thing.

Funerals – pie in the sky when you die, a cup of tea with auntie in heaven.

The sword of spirit challenges our values, our assumptions as well.

*(The sermon was guided by these notes, but much of it was improvised, and Brian ended with a flourish, a sort of call to arms, which was not recorded.)*