

Ephesians 6

Today marks an important anniversary for it was on this day, 67 years ago

- Following the invasion of Poland on 1 September
- British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, gave a deadline
- For the withdrawal of German troops from Germany
- And stated that unless withdrawal plans were announced
- Britain would be at war with Germany
- But no such undertaking was received
- And so at 11.00 am on 3 September 1939, Britain declared war on Germany
- And the air-raid sirens sounded
- Later that day France also entered the war

The Prime Minister asked the people of Britain to stand calm

- To be firm and united in the time of trial
- All men between 18 and 41 years of age were liable to be called up to service
- News that Britain and France had declared war was greeted
- With cheering and singing in Poland's capital Warsaw

Today marks the beginning of a new Methodist year

- Although it is far more important to be Christian than to be Methodist
- Despite the many faults of the Methodist Church in Great Britain
- I am happy to affirm that the traditional Methodist emphases
- On personal faith in Jesus Christ, the warmed heart, and assurance of salvation
- Are as relevant today as they have ever been
- But at the beginning of the year we have to restate our purpose and our goals
- And recommit ourselves to the service of the Lord Jesus Christ
- And to acknowledge that we are engaged in a battle
- One that not only affects the fate of nations and peoples
- But one that is a battle for humanity itself

If that sounds somewhat melodramatic, let me ask you, if you do not believe that

- What do you believe?
- In recent days I have spent a lot of time out on the streets meeting people
- Some people, and I respect them, have said that they don't believe what I believe
- What they think I believe and what I actually believe are sometimes quite different
- But that is not relevant for our purposes here
- It is all right for the man and woman in the street to tell me what they don't believe
- But regarding matters of eternity let's all be bold enough to say
- Not only what we believe but also why we believe it

I believe that the Bible is God's word and that through it God speaks to us today

- I believe that the Bible contains a unique and reliable record of Jesus Christ
- His life, death and resurrection, his ascension into heaven
- And his promise to return in glory
- I believe that all authority in heaven and earth are committed to him
- And that it is vital that Christians make disciples – baptising and teaching as they go
- I do not believe evangelism is one of the church's task – it is the church's only task

In sharing in the work of knowing Christ and making him known

- It is foolish to contend that we are in anything else other than a battle
- And foolish to pretend either as individual Christians or as a church
- That the battle is easy – we all know how easy it is to fall to personal temptation
- And we cannot help but see that the church is not what it should be
- Whether we think of the church locally, nationally or internationally
- A greater awareness of the world, the church and ourselves
- Should cause us to realise that what we need is:

I POWER from God for all the people

The last chapter of his letter to the Ephesian Christians, the Apostle Paul writes

- ‘Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power’
- I don’t want anyone to misunderstand what I am saying now, so I will state clearly
- That the relationship of the individual Christian trusting the Lord Jesus is important
- But some Christians seem to be pretending that nothing else is important at all

Sometimes when I was playing football Janet would ask me as I came home

- How did you get on? And I would reply, “Oh! I had quite a good game.”
- What was the score? We lost 5-0 but I was good!
- It is a shame to say it but some Christians are adopting that approach today
- They see the world around them, they see the state of the church
- But they conclude that they are jogging along happily as Christians
- And that is all there is to it – some people even market this as ‘maturity’
- Implying because they are spiritually mature that they are untroubled by such things
- But this complacent attitude is not what is commanded in the New Testament
- Where Christian warfare is the external counterpart of inward growth
- ‘be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power’

On the other hand, it is also easy to look at the world and the church

- and become despondent – in Britain we have increased secularisation
- ageing and declining congregations and buildings that only look back to better days
- complacency is not an option but neither is despondency
- the believer needs to be realistic but needs also to focus upon Jesus Christ
- for all the things that we need are to be found in Christ himself
- and all our resources may be found in Christ and his ‘mighty power’
- this is the same power that raised Jesus from the dead (Ephesians 1:20)
- this the power that brought the Ephesians to life
- when they were dead in trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1)

The command to ‘be strong in the Lord’ reinforces the idea that we are in a battle

- otherwise there would be no need for the commandment to be strong
- but it also proves that God will provide for his people
- and that anything that we lack comes from our neglect
- his empowering is not automatic, but comes from our relationship with him
- but notice ‘be strong’, ‘put on the full armour of God’, stand (10-11, 14)
- are not commands in the singular but commands in the plural

It seems to me that there is not enough sense of the church being the army of God

- too many times we are just made of individuals, offering their own ministry
- and doing their own thing in the life of the church – or I suppose rather worse
- not really offering their own ministry and not doing anything
- the three imperatives could really be translated – be strong *together*
- put on the full armour of God *everyone* and stand *together*

To use another football illustration – the full-team is a team of eleven

- not often, but occasionally, one of the players did not come
- if one player did not come we would probably lose
- if that person was the goalkeeper we had almost inevitably had it
- but if two players did not come we were more or less beaten before we started
- in any team, whether you turn up or not really matters
- yet, apparently, in the church it is different – not it is not different
- whether or not you are there matters – whether you give your God-given all matters
- without denying their relevance to individuals
- these commands are for the church collectively

This is not a sermon on each item of the full armour of God – worthwhile as that would be

- but nevertheless we must be prepared for the inevitable encounter with evil
- Paul describes a Roman soldier in full armour (panoply)
- Perhaps he is simply describing the soldier to whom he is chained during his arrest
- The Roman armour may be unfamiliar to us but we know the equipment of riot police
- A police officer in riot gear has a belt, bullet-proof vest, boots, shield, helmet, weapon
- It is a matter of our taking the battle in which we are engaged seriously enough
- I am in a spiritual battle and I need to be equipped

In 1981, the Methodist Church sent me to a placement in Notting Hill, West London

- I was due to arrive on the Tuesday and on the previous Saturday there was a riot
- (not I think because they knew that I was coming)
- during my stay I was in conversation with my supervising minister
- telling him where I had been and what I had been doing
- unwittingly, I, as a young white man, had walked down a road in Notting Hill
- that more disaffected sections of the Afro-Caribbean community called ‘the front line’
- that’s where Christians need to be – on the front line
- too many of us have retreated into the security of the Christian ghetto
- where our little subset thinks and behaves just like us
- and communication faith, hope and love with the unbelieving, hopeless and loveless
- if we had ever communicated it at all, has become an impossible task

It is important for believers in our communities to be on the front line

- to engage with people who do not think like us
- and when pressed to stand firm
- standing firm does not sound much but it is important to stand firm
- stand against the pagan lifestyle that is now all around us
- and to be ready to advance, in the name of Christ, his gospel and his church
- the fourfold repetition of ‘against’ shows that the battle is real

Our struggle is not against flesh and blood

- it is against the rulers, against authorities, against the powers of this dark world
- against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms
- our struggle is not with human being but with evil spiritual forces
- victory is already assured because Jesus has won the victory over sin and death
- but that is not to understate the strength of the enemy
- there are people who think that a struggle against supernatural forces
- is simply archaic nonsense, while others have an excessive fascination with the idea
- when we are asked to explain monstrous evil in the world – what do we say
- the worrying thing about the Nazis is not that they were people very different from us
- but they were people just like us – evil is never experienced in vague, abstract form
- it approaches powerfully and personally
- that said the Bible does not describe a world filled with demons
- people need to take responsibility for their own evil and to stay away from anything
- that even hints at the supernatural but does not give all the glory to Jesus

The full armour reminds us that each believer needs to be prepared for the fight

- so that when the battle is at its fiercest, the soldiers of Christ will hold the line
- standing in truth, righteousness, readiness and faith
- we do not stand in our own works but only in what Christ has done for us
- and we stand together because we are united in the fellowship of prayer

II PRAYER from all the people

Paul easily moves from his description of battle-dress and armour to the command to pray

- and pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests
- be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints
- as far as Paul is concerned the believe will be in constant prayer
- which does not mean that the whole of life is prayer whether you pray or not
- but does mean that prayer should be an integral part of the Christian's life
- it is prayer in the Spirit that brings the believer into communion with God
- praying in the Spirit engages with God – but it is not limited to 'life with me and God'
- but brings the believer into an awareness of the world and a larger set of relations

One of the vital things for which Paul asks them to pray is to be given the words to speak

- for what the church needs is POWER from God for all the people
- PRAYER from all the people
- Paul recognises his own dependency on the power from God
- and the prayers of his friends

This is a hard teaching for those of us who like human ingenuity and honest endeavour

- there is little, so we can think, that can beat new ideas and working hard at them
- but that is not what we find in the Bible
- instead we find people relying on the Power of God and the Prayers of the people
- many of us are concerned about what one might call the failure of preaching
- but we have to understand that preaching is not a lecture or a religious discourse
- it is a spiritual task which needs spiritual power and spiritual power needs prayer

III PREACHING to all the people

Methodist preachers are required to read John Wesley's 44-sermons

- preachers used to be required to read all 44 and be examined on them
- later that number was reduced to 12, while today I think it is fewer still
- apart from the 18th century English what we have to say about most of them is
- they are incredibly dull whether they were much different at the time is hard to say
- yet despite their apparent dullness, thousands turned to Jesus Christ
- in 1989, I attended nine meetings of the famous preacher, Billy Graham
- first at Crystal Palace Athletics stadium and then at Earl's Court
- I found myself coming to the conclusion that on paper my sermons were better
- But when Billy Graham invited people to go forward – hundreds went
- And it is not unusual to meet a Christian who says that they took a step of faith
- At a Billy Graham meeting – it is not about being a good preacher but a powerful one
- What we need today is the power of God, this comes through the prayers of his people

Paul is an ambassador in chains, he is not praying to lose the chains

- What he is praying for is the power to testify faithfully
- That his mouth will be opened and filled with the word of God
- In so doing he is likely to meet with a barrage of fiery darts
- Which in Roman times were cane darts dipped in pitch and set alight
- He will need the shield of faith, he will need others with that shield to gather round
- With such shields all the incendiary devices flung by the devil can be extinguished

It is the sword of the Spirit, the word of God that is the Christian's only weapon offence

- And Paul prays that he might declare it fearlessly – why should that be an issue
- Although the Christian gospel starts with the love and grace of God
- As it is made known in person in Jesus – people do not like reminding
- Of their unbelief and sin, of their helplessness without God
- People do not like to be taken to the cross where Jesus was crucified
- And being invited to realise that it is unbelief and sin like ours that put him there
- It is doubt and unbelief that causes us to need a Saviour
- Jesus is the promised Saviour and when he died he died for us
- Making himself a self-offering to God that we might know forgiveness and life
- His death was not the end of the story for he rose, appeared and returned to heaven
- Where even now he prays and prepares for us – and he will come again
- We need to declare it fearlessly because the gospel demands we all repent of our sins
- And turn to Christ in faith and obedience

This is the church's task – anything that does not do this is not our task but a hindrance

- I POWER from God for all the people
- II PRAYER from all the people
- III PREACHING to all the people

It might not make us popular but this and nothing else is the divine commission