

Today is our last reading of a set of 7 readings the past 7 weeks from the Epistle to the Ephesians. And this part of the letter is a little like a locker-room speech from a coach encouraging his team to get out there and put into practice on the field the things that he has taught them.

He wants them to stand together as a Christian community, centered on the Cross of Jesus Christ. He wants them to be unified, and to be kind and forgiving to each other. And he wants them to stand firm in the face of evil.

Paul says, "Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil."¹

For 21st century hearers, that's where we run into a problem right off the bat. The devil. We might question if that's even an idea modern people can accept.

But Paul doesn't stop with mention of the devil. He also talks about other dark, demonic spiritual forces. He says, "For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."²

And when Paul talks about rulers and authorities, he's not talking about humans here. He's talking about demonic forces that have control of certain areas of the globe.

And as I said, this can cause problems for 21st century hearers.

After all, to us the devil is often a cartoon character in red with horns and a pointed tail and a pitchfork. He's just some fantasy character that can be easily dismissed.

On the other end of the spectrum, we have folks who seem obsessed with Satan and with the demonic. They sometimes go so far as to see Satan as a cosmic force equal or almost equal in power to God. They see the devil lurking behind everything bad that happens in the world.

Some of you are old enough to remember Flip Wilson's character, Geraldine, who tried to get out of taking responsibility for her actions by simply proclaiming, "The devil made me do it." Everything bad that happens, even our own bad choices, let's blame the devil.

One of the great writers from our tradition, C.S. Lewis, has a different take. He makes a very important statement:

"There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors."³

¹ Eph 6:11

² Eph 6:12

³ *The Screwtape Letters*

For the sake of full disclosure, I do accept the reality of demonic forces. Just as I believe there are angels, scripture also speaks of a significant fraction of God's angels who used their free will and rebelled against God and who were cast out of heaven. Jesus, the apostles, and the early church fathers all spoke of the reality of these demonic forces.

But these beings are fallen angels, they are creatures, they are not equal in power to God. In fact in Christian tradition, the one who stands against the fallen archangel Lucifer or Satan is not God. It is God's servant, another archangel, St. Michael, the patron saint of soldiers and police officers.

Christianity is not a dualistic religion, with the forces of light and darkness precariously balanced and battling each other. Instead, God wins. The powers of evil and death have been decisively defeated through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And with the exception of the rare phenomenon of demon possession, mostly the devil and his followers have been reduced to offering temptations, or whispering lies, or raising doubts. They are certainly not equal to God.

Thus we are called to resist them, and to renounce them. It's no accident that in our baptismal services, one of the questions I ask is,
"Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God."

That's our call, to turn our backs on such evil forces, and to turn toward Jesus Christ.

In Ephesians, Paul has stressed the importance of the Cross in creating the church and making us one. Now, in chapter 6, he calls us to gather around that cross and stand firm in the face of evil.

It's almost an image of an army defending a strong position on a hilltop. Let the enemy come at you, let them wear themselves out. Your job, as Christians, is to stand firm.

Paul encourages us to stand firm in our faith, and he reminds us what it takes to do so. It takes the right equipment. But it also takes the support of fellow Christians.

"Be strong in the Lord," Paul says, "and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil."

Let God strengthen you. How? By putting on the armor he provides.

Why is God arming you? 'So that you may be able to stand against the wiles, the trickiness of the Devil.'

Notice that he says, "stand." He doesn't tell us we can defeat evil. That's way above our pay grade. Instead, God gives us protection, spiritual armor, so that we can stand firm and hold our ground while we're under attack.

And then Paul goes into detail describing the armor God gives us. And when he says armor, he means Roman soldier armor. Think *Gladiator*, not *Camelot*.

First is the belt. Belts were vitally important in Paul's time. Since everyone wore loose flowing robes, they would often get tangled up, they would often get in the way. Whenever anyone wanted to travel or work or fight, they would have to gird up their loins. They would have to pull their robes up and belt them into place so that they wouldn't get in the way.

For Christians, truth is our belt. There are a lot of competing ideas and philosophies in the world, especially in a pluralistic age like this one. Many people walk around guessing and groping, and sometimes getting all tangled up. But if we as Christians surround ourselves with God's truth, then we're ready for action. God's truth gives us a sense of direction and purpose.

Next is the breastplate, one of the strongest and most important pieces of armor. The breastplate protects the vital centers of the body from injury.

The breastplate for us is righteousness. Righteousness, in the Biblical sense, is a legal term. It has to do with innocence, it has to do with being free from wrongdoing. How do you protect your heart? By doing the right thing. Because when we do wrong, things can escalate and get out of hand very quickly. By doing what is right, and by keeping ourselves free from doing wrong, we will protect ourselves from the Evil One.

Next are shoes. One of the secret weapons of the Roman army was their boots, which allowed them to march long distances, and also gave them decent traction in battle which their enemies didn't have. Without shoes, it's hard to travel, fight, or do anything else. Our feet will become quickly bruised and cut. But with shoes, we're ready for action.

The shoes that equip us are the Gospel of Peace, the Good News of Jesus Christ. The Gospel propels us forward and guides our steps. But the Gospel is also a firm surface we can stand on and rely upon.

Next is the shield. There were different kinds of shields in Paul's day. Paul specifically is talking about the large shield used by heavy infantry.

It's a big oblong shield that protects the whole body. These shields were designed, in particular, to protect against arrows and flaming arrows. They had an outer covering of leather that the soldiers would soak in water before a battle. If a flaming arrow struck this particular kind of shield, it would either bounce off, or it would burn itself out without setting the shield on fire.

In the same way, Paul says, it is our faith that provides us with protection against the flaming darts and arrows sent by the Evil One. It is our faith that stands between us and the forces of darkness. We have been soaked in the waters of baptism. Our baptismal faith, our trust in Jesus Christ protects us from the arrows of temptation. We may feel the impact of burning arrows hitting our shields. We may see the smoke and get nervous. But our continued trust, our continued faith in Jesus Christ will allow them to burn themselves out without damaging us.

And this shield didn't just provide cover for a lone infantryman. The Romans would gather in large formations and the soldiers would combine their shields to give cover to each other. Our faith is not just meant to help us personally. We are meant to support each other in faith, to stand together in faith.

Then there's the helmet which crowns us, which protects our heads. The helmet was the very strongest single piece of armor a Roman soldier had. Our helmet is our salvation. God's mighty act of saving and redeeming us through the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ is the crowning triumph and strongest protection for any Christian.

Also we are given a sword. The sword is a weapon of both attack and defense against the forces of sin. Our sword is the Holy Spirit, speaking through the Word of God. This is so important for Christians. We need to spend time reading God's word, preferably every day. We need to let scripture penetrate our hearts.

Lastly, Paul exhorts us to pray constantly. Not just occasionally, but at all times and in all places. Paul tells us that we are to remain alert and persevere in our prayers for the saints, in other words for each other. By praying for each other we help one another stand firm.

The fight is tough. Our enemy is strong. But God is far stronger. And God has given us wonderful gifts: truth, righteousness, the Good News, salvation, faith, scripture, and prayer. By ourselves we're in trouble. But with God's help, and by supporting and helping each other, we can stand firm.

It's tough out there in the world. You'd better not go out there alone. And you'd better not go out unequipped.

Take your comrades in arms. And take along God's armor, sword and shield. That way, you'll be equipped to stand firm, no matter what.

And always pray for and support your fellow Christians, so that they can stand firm, too.

Be strong in the Lord.