

STAND FIRM AGAINST THE ATTACKS OF THE DEVIL**Sermon for the 15th Sunday after Pentecost, 2018****Ephesians 6:10-20**

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is the Second Reading read before, Ephesians 6:10-20: **¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power! ¹¹ Put on the full armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the tricky schemes of the Devil, ¹² because we are not wrestling against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against those who control this dark world, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms! ¹³ Therefore, take up the full armour of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day and, after you have done everything, to stand! ¹⁴ Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness ¹⁵ and having shod your feet with the readiness that comes from the Good News of peace! ¹⁶ Besides all these, take up the shield of faith, with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the Evil One! ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God! ¹⁸ Pray on every occasion with all kinds of prayers and requests in the Spirit! For this purpose, be alert with all perseverance as you pray for all God's holy people! ¹⁹ Pray also for me, that when I open my mouth what to say may be given to me, that I may boldly make known the mystery of the Good News! ²⁰ Because of it I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that in it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak it!**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth, Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Over the past couple months, our sermon texts have been taken from words spoken by the Apostle Paul in his Letter to the Ephesians. Our Second Readings each Sunday has been taken from this Letter. Today is the last Sunday where we have a reading taken from Ephesians, from now on, for the rest of the year, our lectionary will take passages from other Letters of the New Testament.

Perhaps you can remember Paul saying those marvellous words to the Ephesians, *“³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ! ⁴ For before He made the world, His love led Him to choose us in Christ to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love ⁵ He predestined us to be adopted as His own sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with the good pleasure of His will. ⁶ He did this that His glorious grace, which He bestowed on us in His dearly loved Son, might be praised. ⁷ In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, because of God's rich grace,”* (Eph. 1:3-7). This section forms part of a doxology, a song of praise to God.¹ In the Greek it is all one sentence - some two hundred words. The main point of Paul's doxology is to remind the Ephesians, and us, that from eternity God has had a plan of salvation, and that this plan is fulfilled in and through Christ, and that God's plan gives us unspeakably great and precious blessings and is our reason for praising Him. We trust in the promises of God that He would take care of us in this life, before taking us to be with Him forever in eternity. We know that we have a mansion in heaven, a place prepared by Jesus for us to be with Him forever, and that we would rather leave here to be with Him which is better by far.

However, that is a future glory for each of us. We live in the here and now, and we know from experience that not all is rosy in this life. We only need to look around us to see that life isn't easy. All around, people are struggling. Many aren't asking big questions about life. They just want to make their paycheques go a little further. They just want to make sure their children are protected and taken care of, that they have a bright future. They just want to get along with their families. They struggle against depression, cancer, addiction, broken marriages, broken families, or guilt over past sins. They just want a day when life isn't a constant struggle. They just want to be able to “make it” in this life. But it's not just “those people.” Life is a struggle for *each and every one of us.* Hardship and heartache are part of the daily struggle that we all face in this fallen world. We all have our crosses to bear. Those struggles that make life almost unbearable at times.

Yet as great as those struggles are in our lives, we face an even greater struggle that isn't **against flesh and blood but against the spiritual forces of evil at work.** while most of the time we tend to focus on our earthly struggles, there really is a greater struggle going on, a cosmic struggle between good and evil, between God and Satan. This evil foe is behind the broken relationships and broken hearts that fall into his traps. This evil foe is the one who rubs his hands with glee every time he sees someone giving up hope. Therefore Paul tells us to **¹¹ Put on the full armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the tricky schemes of the Devil, ¹² because we are not wrestling against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against those who control this dark world, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms!**

¹ This doxology continues through to verse 14

There is nothing strange about seeing Christians struggle with the evil in this world. In fact, Paul describes the struggles Christians face with such evil as a *wrestling match*. We are not at war with mere men, with whom we might be able to overcome with external, physical weapons. But our wrestling, our hand-to-hand encounter, is with forces of evil that are present in all the enemies of the Word and the Church; powers of spirits. There are rulers, chiefs, and heads of the battalions of evil spirits; there are demonic authorities; there are the world ruling powers of the evil angels with Satan, the prince of this world, at their head; there are entire hosts, large forces, bands, armies of spirits, all spirits of wickedness and malice. The devils are world rulers of darkness, they rule through the darkness of sin. In sin Satan has established his kingdom in this world, he has succeeded in leading men away from the one true God, the Father of Light, into the rule of darkness and sin, where the knowledge of God cannot enlighten them. St. Paul calls all the enemies **spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms**, for they belong to the supernatural, transcendental world. For that very reason, because the evil spirits as spirits cannot be attacked with physical weapons, they are stronger and more dangerous than any visible creature. And quite often, Satan attacks us without even being noticed as we are easily led astray. Though he may be shrewd, there's nothing weak about the one of whom Martin Luther said in his great hymn, "*On earth is not his equal*." Peter pictures the old evil foe as a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour,² while our Lord describes him as the father of all lies.³ The warning from St. Paul is that our struggle is not just paying the bills or facing health or family issues, as intense as those are, but rather facing this fierce enemy who seeks only our destruction. How can we possibly stand against Satan and the dark forces of evil?

The only way we can stand against Satan is by knowing we don't have the strength within us. Left to our own devices, we cannot stand. We are easy prey for the devil's snares of lies and lust. In our weakness, we easily stumble into his traps of selfishness and greed. We are not equipped to battle against this fierce foe. Instead, our strength comes from the Lord. Paul says to **be strong in the Lord**. Our strength is not found in our knowledge, effort, or even our faith, but in Christ alone. It is in Christ and His cross that we are strengthened for the struggles against the devil's wiles that we face each day. Even though our Lord Jesus Christ came in humility and weakness, He alone is our refuge and strength. He is the one who has conquered sin by keeping the Law perfectly in our place. He is the one who has vanquished death by His triumphant death and resurrection from the grave. This Son of Man came to crush Satan's head and open for us the way of everlasting life. Our strength comes from the One who is mighty to save. Earlier, Paul prayed for the Ephesians, that they would be "*strengthened with power through His Spirit in your inner being*," (3:16). Here Paul requests that God would give the Ephesians strength - spiritual strength, which comes only through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's work affects the "inner being," that is, the new man created when the Ephesians were brought to faith. This new man grows as the Spirit continues to work in believers through Word and Sacrament, making us ever more sure and confident of our salvation as faith in Christ grows.

This is the strength that comes from God alone that enables us to stand. Even in a world of "COEXIST" bumper stickers and intolerant demands for tolerance, the people of God are able to stand for and by the truth of God's Word. We are able to stand against the devil and his schemes, for we have put on the new man, Christ Jesus, in the waters of Holy Baptism. When Paul calls us to **take up the full armour of God**, the various pieces of armour that he proceeds to describe are all given in the one garment we put on in Holy Baptism. Clothed in Christ and His strength, we are able to stand **against the rulers, against the authorities, against those who control this dark world, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms!**

Strengthened by the Holy Spirit at work through the Word, we can stand firm in the Lord. Our spiritual knees may be wobbly and our resolve weak. We may be afraid as we gaze upon the enemies who attack us. We may be full of doubts and uncertainty standing against the devil and all the forces of evil. But the One who is in you, Christ Jesus the crucified and risen Lord, is greater than the one who is in the world, that old evil foe. So we can take heart and stand firm with the strength that the Lord gives.

Finally, too, Paul encourages us to pray. He says, ¹⁸ **Pray on every occasion with all kinds of prayers and requests in the Spirit!**

By praying in the Spirit, Paul is not advocating some dramatic or showy charismatic praying. Rather, he is indicating that only through Christ can anyone properly approach the triune God. An essential feature of prayer is that it comes from a heart filled with faith⁴, and faith, of course, is something that only the Holy Spirit can work. Spirit-worked faith takes God at His word, trusts His promises, and confidently approaches Him as a dear heavenly Father. All this meshes perfectly with what Paul wrote earlier: "*Through Him [Christ] we both [Jew and Gentile] have access, by one Spirit, to the Father*,"

² 1 Peter 5:8

³ John 8:44

⁴ James 1:6-7; Hebrews 11:6

(2:18).

Scripture invites and encourages us to pray. The Lord promises: “*Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honour Me,*” (Psalm 50:15). Our Saviour solemnly assured His disciples and us, “*Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you,*” (Luke 11:9). Peter encourages his readers, “*Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you,*” (1 Peter 5:7). Elsewhere Paul says, “*Pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus,*” (1 Thessalonians 5:17-18).

In the area of spiritual matters, such as forgiveness of sins, the gift of a good conscience, conversion of unbelievers, or unity in the church, we know that it is God’s gracious will to give us those things. In *temporal matters*, however, we will always add the condition “if it is Your will.” Such prayers are answered - in God’s good time and in His way. Living in this world, struggling with life, we must continually converse with God, trusting that He knows what is best for us.

So it is that Satan and the dark forces of evil will continue to wage war against the saints of God. Our life this side of eternity will still be marred by an ongoing wrestling with the enemies. We will continue to see Satan at work even in our legal systems, our governments, our schools, and even in our houses. But we are strengthened in the Lord as the Holy Spirit strengthens the baptised through His mighty Word. God’s Word is the truth. There is nothing Satan is so helpless before as the Word of God. Therefore, it pays to keep ourselves informed and learn to make good use of the Scriptures when we are attacked by him. It will keep us safe, and never let us down. In the Lord’s strength and the power of His might, we will not be misled by the devil’s lies or fall into his traps. Instead, we trust when dark our road, knowing that we have a God who loves us so much that He gave His only Son for us. It is in Him, and Him alone, that we seek our protection. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Lord our God, we rejoice to stand in Your presence and to come before You in prayer, praise, and thanks through Your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. We thank You for showing us Your power and glory in this vast universe, and for enabling us to see Your majesty and might in the creation around us. We praise You for filling the earth with life and goodness, and for renewing it continually according to Your laws. Help us to harvest the fruit of honest effort, to find joy in the coming of each new day, and to rest in the peace of each night.

Above all else, we thank You for the gift of Your only Son Jesus Christ, and for revealing Yourself and Your saving love to us through Him. We praise You for His holy life of true manhood, for His innocent sufferings and death on our behalf, and for His glorious resurrection to eternal life, so that, through Him, we have the forgiveness of our sins, the power to conquer all evil, and the sure gift of eternal life. Bring us finally to the everlasting kingdom that You have promised us through Your Son.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for the gift of Your Word to be the lamp to light our path through life. Give us Your Spirit that we may listen to Your Word with eager understanding. Enrich our lives with the endurance and the encouragement that the Scriptures give, and fill us with hope, now and for ever. Lead us by the Spirit, so that we may not conform to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Teach us to ignore the desires of our sinful natures. Give us confidence that there is wisdom in Your commandments, and grant that we may take delight in them. Fill our lives with the Spirit’s fruit of love, joy, peace, humility, patience, goodness, and faithfulness.

We pray for Your Church. Rule and direct it to accomplish Your purposes and plans. Defend it against all error and doubt, and keep it in the truth. Make it alive by Your grace, that it may seek to praise You in every good work.

Uphold all leaders in our land. We pray for our newly elected Prime Minister. Help him and all who rule over us to know and follow Your will, so that they may maintain law and order with firmness and love, and so that we may live in peace and quietness, and serve You without hindrance. Frustrate any ideas they may have to enact laws that go against Your commands.

Bless our homes. Guide all parents that Your Word and will may have pride of place in their lives. Help the young to live in the light of Your Word and to know the happiness of a life of faith and purity.

We pray for all who are facing hardship, sickness, suffering, and danger. Fill their lives with Your grace, and hold before them the perfect peace of Christ. Please bring an end to this terrible drought by sending refreshing rain.

These prayers, and all our unspoken desires, and anything else we should have asked of Your mercy, give us for the sake of Your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

The 15th Sunday after Pentecost

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

¹ “Now, Israel, listen to the Statutes and Decisions that I am teaching you to observe, that you may live, enter and take possession of the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving to you! ² You shall not add anything to the Word that I am commanding you and you shall not take anything away from it, that you may keep the Commandments of the LORD, your God, which I am commanding you! ...

⁶ “Therefore, you shall keep them and observe them! For this is your wisdom and your understanding that the other peoples should see. For, when they hear all these Statutes, they will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people!’ ⁷ For what other great nation has gods who are as near to it as the LORD, our God, has been in everything for which we have called on Him? ⁸ Or what other great nation is there that has Statutes and Decisions as righteous as all this teaching, which I am setting before you today? ⁹ Only be on your guard and watch yourself carefully, that you may not forget the things that you have seen with your own eyes and that you may not fail to keep them in mind all your life! You shall teach them to your children and to your grandchildren!

Ephesians 6:10-20

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power! ¹¹ Put on the full armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the tricky schemes of the Devil, ¹² because we are not wrestling against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against those who control this dark world, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms!

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Mark 7:14-23

¹⁴ When He had called the multitude to Himself again, He told them, “Listen to Me, all of you and understand this! ¹⁵ There is nothing that enters a person from outside that can defile him. Rather, the things that come out of a person are the things that defile a person.”

¹⁷ When He had left the crowd and gone home, His disciples asked Him about this parable.

¹⁸ He asked them, “Are you also so lacking in understanding? Do you not know that nothing that comes into a person from the outside can defile him, ¹⁹ because it does not go into his heart but into his stomach and goes out into the toilet?” — In saying this, Jesus declared all foods “clean.” — ²⁰ He went on to say: “What comes out of a person is the thing that defiles him. ²¹ For from inside, out of people’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual sins, thefts, murders, ²² adulteries, sinful desires, greed, wickedness, cheating, shameless lust, a jealous eye, slander, pride and folly. ²³ All these evils come from inside and ‘defile’ a person.”