

*Trinity 12 2012*

Keep safe – that could be the mantra for our age. Travel, but make sure you have all your vaccinations, ride a bike, but make sure you wear a helmet, in all things make sure you are protected.

It would be very easy to read the passage from Ephesians in the same light – it is all about keeping safe, being adequately protected, but that would be to miss much of the impact. This is armour for war.

War today is completely different from how it was 2000 years ago. For us, even with the graphic pictures of war that we see in our newspapers, unless we have relatives in the armed forces, it does not make a huge impact upon our daily lives. So it is easy for us to condemn all references to fighting, to feel a bit uncomfortable singing Soldiers of Christ arise. If you have young boys, they may want to play with guns – do you let them? I played with cap guns when I was a child, but my son's best friend when he was small, was not allowed guns or any weapons. He was, however, mad keen on toy soldiers, so was probably the only child with a complete army of map reading soldiers.

War is vile and terrifying. But pretending it doesn't happen doesn't make it go away. Sometimes war appears to be the least evil of all the available options. There has been much written on the concept of just war. But this passage from Ephesians is about spiritual warfare. And although there is much about defence – the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation, there is also the sword of the Spirit, a weapon of attack.

This is not about passively sitting there carefully protected against all harm, it is wearing the armour of battle, it is about being prepared to get out there and go into war. Our weapon is the Word of God.

What might this mean for us?

I have always wanted to do some research into personality types of members of different churches. I have long suspected that extravert types tend to be more attracted to charismatic churches, churches that give you a set answers to every question will attract another kind of person, whereas a church like St Mary's probably attracts more reflective people – a gross overgeneralisation I am sure. But I suspect that for many of us here today, the image of the Word of God as a weapon of war does not sit comfortably with our views.

As with any weapon, it depends how you use it.

It is possible to terrify people into conversion. I don't believe that is a right use of this weapon.

Yet in the world today there are wrongs that need righting. When we look at the evils in the world, the slaughter of striking miners in South Africa, the rise of militant religious extremism, the huge number of people facing starvation, so many of these issues have their origin in poverty, the enormous disparity between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless.

The Word of God is perhaps the only weapon that can deal with this enemy.

Think of the stories that Jesus told:

The story of the rich man Dives and the beggar Lazarus: How Dives had despised Lazarus when he was alive, but now, seeing him with Abraham wanted to warn others, but it was too late. Even if someone were to come back from the dead, Jesus says, they will not believe.

.....Or the parable of the sheep and the goats that is told in Matthew's gospel. Those welcomed into God's kingdom are told, when I was hungry you fed me, when I was naked, you clothed me. 'When did we do this'. 'Whatever you did to the least of my people you did to me'.

The message could not be clearer.

The Word of God can and should be used by us to fight the evil that is poverty.

But there are other evils too in the world.

There is the desire for status, for recognition. James and John wanted to know whether they would sit at Jesus side in heaven and were told in no uncertain terms that discipleship was not about status but about service, about giving not receiving.

And what about the evil that is fear and hatred, the desire for revenge that fuels continuing conflict. Forgive, said Jesus, even if you are sinned against 70 times 7 times. And Jesus told the story of the prodigal son to demonstrate the meaning of forgiveness. The son who was feckless, wanted everything now, and took his inheritance early and lost the lot, yet was still welcomed back. The door was never shut against him it was never too later for him to apologise and be forgiven.

Think of the people who so desperately need reconciliation and forgiveness. Here is the message for them.

And finally, perhaps the worst evil of all, apathy.

The apathy that allows harm to the poor or to the environment to continue unchecked is a failure to feel love – love for others, love for ourselves. So also is the apathy that fails to take God seriously. This unwillingness to engage with the business of loving is an unwillingness to take risks - the risk of finding the cost too great for us. The cost might be our time, it might be financial, it might be the burden of feeling inadequate. Whatever it is, it is safer not to be involved. So we don't engage, don't find out the facts, or if there is no escaping them, don't treat them with the seriousness they deserve.

Apathy is a closing in of the world. A deliberate shrinkage of it, putting a boundary around those people and things that are important and those that we decide we do not need to or prefer not to care about.

It is not simply the sin of omission, it is potentially far more serious than that.

Ultimately, apathy is a denial of God's love. The gospel message can overcome apathy.

So put on the armour of God. Not to keep safe, but to go on the attack, to be a force for good.