

Be strong in the Lord

We explored last week how important music and singing are to us – to us as people – because music is everywhere – as well as to us as Christians. Songs stick with us, and it's easier to remember a song than it is to remember a careful explanation.

In fact, careful explanations are not often the way to best communicate ideas. When you get down to detailed level they are – whether it's theology or physics or even the rules of your favourite sport – but before we get there, it's generally helpful to have something that's easier to follow, examples and imagery and stories that we can relate to.

Jesus, when he was explaining what the kingdom of God was, used stories. He used parables – just from Mark's gospel, we can learn that the kingdom of God is like a man who scatters seed on the ground (Mark 4:26), and that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed (Mark 4:31).

Jesus told these parables using imagery that his listeners could relate to. We know the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son. The Rich Man and Lazarus. The Lost Sheep and so on.

Paul similarly used imagery in his writings from time to time. For instance, he uses the image of a running race in his letters:

To the Corinthians: Surely you know that many runners take part in a race, but only one of them wins the prize. Run, then, in such a way as to win the prize. (1 Cor 9:24)

To Timothy: Run your best in the race of faith, and win eternal life for yourself; for it was to this life that God called you when you firmly professed your faith before many witnesses. (1 Tim 6:12), and

I have done my best in the race, I have run the full distance, and I have kept the faith. (2 Tim 4:7)

Perhaps Paul's most famous use of imagery is in today's reading from Ephesians, and it's one that I first encountered when I was nine years old. I went on a Sunday School camp to Gerroa on the south coast. We had a series of talks on this passage from a man named Graham Wade.

You may remember Graham Wade: during the late seventies there was a series of Christian television ads broadcast showing bible stories being illustrated. The screen would show a blank piece of paper, the story would be told in voiceover, and a hand would the side and start drawing with charcoal pencil and crayon. Really, really quickly.

That hand belonged to Graham Wade. Now, the footage for TV may have been sped up a bit, but when you saw him draw live, he was not too far off that pace.

Graham died in 2009, but I'd had the privilege of seeing him teach and draw only a few years before that, and he hadn't lost any of his talent, or his speed, or his spark.

But back when I was nine, he was guest speaker at my Sunday School camp and he was illustrating this passage from Ephesians. For a nine year old boy interested in history and legend, and particularly King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, this was fantastic stuff. Armour. The breastplate. The shield. The flaming arrows. The helmet. The sword of the spirit. The devil! I didn't really understand then about the importance of the belt. But other than that: Wow.

Graham's illustrations were magnificent. And on the last day, the sixth grade kids got to take a picture home if they could answer a question correctly. Sadly, I was in fourth grade, and didn't get to compete. Interestingly, the most sought-after picture was the one of the devil...

I don't remember everything that I was taught at Sunday School when I was nine, but I remember the images that Graham created for us, and of course those images just brought out the imagery that Paul used when he wrote to the Ephesians.

This morning's reading starts with the word "finally" – and it is the end of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. He brings together all the ideas that he has been writing to the Ephesians about and he challenges them to go forth in the faith and in turn to support him in prayer.

In his letter, Paul has written about the blessings all people have in Christ, the forgiveness of sins, Christian unity, the need to proclaim the gospel to all people, the need to change and repent, the need to be Christ-like, the importance of relationships within communities and families (and I'm sure many of you who are parents will recall well chapter six verse one: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.")

Having said all these things, Paul comes to verse 10: "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power." We are called as Christians to grow in the knowledge and love of God, and not only are we called to do that, God helps us do that (we can't do it without him) by the action of the Holy Spirit within us.

Paul urges us to "Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes." (6:11)

I remember Graham Wade's illustration of the devil – red skin, horns, thin moustache, pointy beard, evil smile, holding a pitchfork. Not very scary at all, really, but a popular image of the devil.

These days, the devil is mostly ignored in society, and if the devil is mentioned, he is more and more caricatured – he's become a cartoon villain, someone to be laughed at rather than feared.

But not so for Paul: he regards the devil as a real threat: For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. (6:12)

I do think, that at least sometimes, there is evil at work in the world that transcends what humans might come up with on their own. Ideas that take root and spread and

corrupt. Certainly not someone prancing around in red tights waving a pitchfork, but something – someone – far more insidious, far more corrupting.

And having warned the Ephesians of the threat, Paul tells us of God's equipping them – and us – to deal with it. Put on the armour.

Not many of us wear armour these days, but we still need to protect ourselves.

Paul tells us to “stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place.” The belt of a soldier carries his sword and his knife and keeps them ready. We need to be equipped and ready. We need to know God and the scriptures, and we need to be as righteous – as good as we can be – to avoid falling. (6:14)

We need to be not complacent. We heard in our old testament reading this morning (Joshua 24:1-2a, 15-18) how the ancient people of God reflected on all that God had done for them – leading them out of Egypt, performing miracles, keeping them safe, and bringing them to the promised land – and how they would never leave the Lord to serve other Gods. We know from the rest of the Old Testament how that worked out.

They had the right intentions, they said the right things, but their later actions didn't follow through on their promise. They weren't well equipped, they weren't ready.

“And with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.” (6:15) which of course harks back to Isaiah 52:7: “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God reigns.””

Feet are okay, but with shoes we can walk further, and in more places, and travel faster than with bare feet. So we need to be equipping ourselves with such shoes – we need to prepare ourselves to proclaim the gospel of Jesus – to bring people the good news.”

“In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.” (6:16).

Without faith. Without faith in Jesus, we're vulnerable to temptation, to falling down the slipping slope of corruption, of taking the easy way out, of taking advantage of others. And we pray on this every week: “Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil”.

The last part of the equipping for defence is Paul urging the Ephesians to accept salvation as a helmet. The helmet is the last hope of protection: The enemy might have got past a soldier's spear, or the soldier might have failed to deflect the blow with his sword, and not been able to block it with his shield. The last thing that stands between the enemy's sword and the soldier's head is the helmet. The soldier doesn't have to move the helmet into place, or have any special skill in using it, it is just there. Always on his head.

In modern times, in dangerous environments, we wear helmets too. Again, they don't need any special skill to use, they are just there.

And so it is with our salvation as Christians. When all else is gone. Friends, family, wealth, shelter, health, gone, there is still salvation for all us. The sure and certain hope that God has given us in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And along with that hope, is the word of God as the sword of the Spirit. The power to do what is right, to fight injustice, to stand up against what is wrong, to share God's kingdom. And we do those things empowered by the Spirit.

For all these things to come together, we need to have a relationship with God; so Paul tells us to "...pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people." (6:18)

When we pray we don't just – or we shouldn't just – pray for ourselves. We need to pray for all God's people, and all those who will be God's people. And if something seems beyond us, we need to pray for God's help.

There is not a time when you're no longer in need of praying or no longer in need of the prayerful support of others. It doesn't matter if you've been a Christian a day, or a lifetime, you need to pray.

And you need to be prayed for, too. It doesn't matter if you lead prayers at church, or if you're an elder and pray with others. You also need to be prayed for.

Paul says, "Pray also for me". Paul was a towering Christian leader. He was knowledgeable, he lived out his faith in Christ in ways that are staggering, and he had an incredible passion for sharing the gospel. He was in many ways a model Christian.

And yet he asks for prayer for himself: "Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel." (6:19)

In many ways the gospel is a mystery. While we know and can share the gospel, it is a mystery in *how* it works. God is beyond human knowledge.

Logically, the gospel doesn't make much sense, but empowered by God, by the Holy Spirit, it is salvation for each one of us.

Paul says he is an ambassador for the gospel – a representative of the gospel in the world, and as he writes this letter, he reflects that he is an ambassador in chains, and asks that his readers pray that he may declare it fearlessly, as he should.

Even though he's in prison, he's going to share the gospel. And do it boldly. How do we measure up to that standard? How do we go in sharing the gospel boldly.

We might not be in prison. But how do we go in sharing the gospel at the shops? Or with our neighbours? Or even in church?

The imagery that Paul uses is powerful. We need to as Paul said "Stand ready" to "Be prepared". To use all the gifts that God has given us to stand up – and to stand – out as followers of Christ. Truth. Righteousness. Readiness to announce the Good News. Faith. Salvation. The Word of God.

Those who oppose us may not have thin moustaches, pointy beards and horns on their foreheads, but there is opposition to the gospel, there are those who will try to lead us astray.

So let us equip ourselves with the whole armour of God. And let us pray for ourselves and for each other, and let us share the good news of Jesus, wherever we may find ourselves. Today, and always, let us be strong in the Lord.

Amen.