

## **Sermon: Be prepared**

Songs are a great way to remember things; it's been observed that these days, Christians generally sing their theology. In the not too distant past, creeds – particularly the Nicene Creed and the Apostles creed – featured in most worship services. The congregation would say in unison “I believe in God the Father almighty, the creator of heaven and earth...” and so on. It was a clear statement of our shared faith.

Not so much these days, but we do sing our theology.

Songs stick with us. Imagery sticks with us. It's easier to remember a song than it is to remember a careful explanation. The Wesley brothers knew this, and Charles Wesley was the master. They would preach a sermon, and then teach the people a song to go with it. And that's how we come to have some of the great hymns we sing nowadays. They didn't so much set out to write a hymn, they set out to explain a point. And do it in music.

Wesley's hymns – and so many other hymns, too – stick with us, speak to us today, help us to

understand great truths about theology – about who God is and what he has done for us in Jesus.

From our opening hymn this morning we know that we know that Jesus *“breaks the power of cancelled sin, sets the prisoner free, his blood can make the foulest clean, his blood availed for me.”*

Or from another great that we will have later:

*“And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Saviour's blood! Died he for me? who caused his pain! For me? who him to death pursued? Amazing love! How can it be that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?”*

And another of Wesley's greats that we're not going to have today, but I really, really hope we'll be singing together later this year:

*Hark the herald angels sing "Glory to the newborn King! Peace on earth and mercy mild God and sinners reconciled".*

It's not just old hymns, either, in 'There is a redeemer', we're reminded that the God the Father gave the Son for us, and sent the Holy Spirit to be with us.

These are great statements of our faith. His blood breaks the power of sin. His blood is availed for me. Died he for me who caused his pain. God and sinners reconciled. They're sung. Regularly – well they were sung regularly until last year – but when they are sung, they're sung passionately. And we remember them.

Songs stick with us. Imagery sticks with us.

Jesus, when he was explaining what the kingdom of God was, didn't sing (as far as we know), but he used imagery, things that would stick in his listeners' minds. He used stories - parables: 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 explained things using imagery that his listeners could relate to. So today we remember, we know, the Good Samaritan. The Prodigal Son. The Rich Man and Lazarus. The Lost Sheep and so on.

By contrast, Paul uses less imagery, although he does quote a lot from the psalms – and the psalms were the hymn book of ancient Israel.

Paul does use imagery from time to time, and when he does, it's particularly remarkable.

He uses the imagery of a running race in his letters to both the Corinthians and Timothy:

*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)*

*Run your best in the race of faith, and win eternal life for yourself... (1 Tim 6:12)*

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

But I think Paul's most famous use of imagery is in today's reading from Ephesians.

This morning's reading starts with the word "finally" – because it is the end of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. He brings together all the things that he has been writing to the Ephesians about and he challenges them to go forward 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 of Jesus to all people, the need to change and repent, the need to be Christ-like, and the importance of relationships within communities and families. (If you are a parent, I'm sure you will fondly recall chapter six verse one, which says: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.")

And so, having said all these things, Paul comes to verse 10 of chapter 6: "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 to do that (in fact, 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)

The devil - the tempter, the deceiver, Satan, make only a few appearances in the bible, and doesn't get mentioned much in churches these days. In modern times, the devil is generally ignored, and if

mentioned, is often mocked: The thin moustache, the pointy beard, the red outfit and the pitchfork - a cartoon villain.

Not really very scary at all, but a popular image of the devil. A caricature.

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)

It does seem to me, that there is evil at work in the world. Evil that sometimes 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.

*Therefore, Paul urges us, [to] put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.* (6:13)

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. Or I guess in modern terms, put on the safety gear.

It's not that long ago that building sites were unfenced. Remember that? Back then, there were no hi-vis vests, brickies' labourers could get around in sandshoes, shorts and no shirts, hardhats were for visiting executives, and safety glasses and earplugs were for wusses.

People these days often complain about work health and safety regulations, but people were injured far more often. Accidents still happen, of course, but they used to happen a lot more. And as well as the immediate things. People went deaf, people got dust diseases, people developed chronic back complaints. But these days, things have changed and the safety gear is used – and yes sometimes it's inconvenient and uncomfortable, and often annoying – but it works. I've done some paving at home, and had to cut pavers to fit, so I measured and marked, and then before I turned on the angle grinder, I had to take my glasses off and put the safety glasses on, put

my earmuffs on, breathing mask on, safety gloves on.

Of course, often I'd go back and find the paver still didn't quite fit and it needed a little bit more off... so I'd take it back to the grinder...

And sometimes if it was only a small cut to be made... well, how dangerous could it really be just to pick up the grinder and go for it?

But one thing I remember hearing is that you always wear the safety glasses when you've only got one eye left...

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

We must not be complacent.

He writes "and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace" or in another translation: "*As shoes for your feet put*

*on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.” (6:15) which of course reminds us of 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” .”*

With shoes we can walk further, and in more places, and travel faster than with bare feet. So we need to be fitting 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 in Jesus, we’re vulnerable to temptation, to falling down the slippery slope of corruption, of taking the easy way out, of taking advantage of others. And we pray on this so often: “Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil”.

The last piece of defence that Paul tells the Ephesians about is the helmet of salvation. 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 the soldier's head.

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 Jesus.

And along with that hope, Paul tells us, is the word of God as the sword. 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; from verse 18 *"And 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. Pray also for me...*” So 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.

And that’s something for all Christians to do. There is not a time when you’re no longer in need of praying or 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.

It doesn’t matter if you lead prayers in church, or if you’re a minister or 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 immensely learned, and knowledgeable, and lived out his faith in Christ in ways that are staggering, and he had such passion for sharing the gospel. If there were points out of ten for being a good Christian, Paul would be a ten. Or maybe an eleven.

And yet he asks for prayer. (and incidentally, there is no score – and that’s a relief to me), Paul says *“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)

I should just comment that there’s no mysterious knowledge at the heart of the gospel. There’s no secret knowledge that only ministers, or only those who are confirmed are allowed to share – it’s there for everyone. What Paul is talking is about is that while we know and can share the gospel it is a mystery in *how* it works. God is beyond human knowledge.

Finally, Paul says *“I am an ambassador in chains”* and he asks the Ephesians *“Pray that I may declare [the gospel] fearlessly, as I 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 chains or in prison. But how do we go in sharing the gospel in lockdown? How

do we share it with our families are friends who don't know Jesus?

The imagery that Paul uses is powerful. We need to as Paul said "Keep alert" 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.

We need to be mindful of, and strengthened by, all that God has done in his Son.

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's equip ourselves with the whole armour of God – all the safety gear that God provides for his people. And let us pray for ourselves and each other, as we share the good news of Jesus, wherever we may find ourselves.

Amen.