

Ephesians 6:10-20

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 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. Therefore, take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

Reflection

‘Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication.’

For the writer of the Ephesians letter, prayer was like armour against the evil in the world, it was like weaponry going into battle against the forces that were trying to prevent the sharing of the mercy and grace of God with all people. In an Anglo-Celtic culture, this can be a difficult one to get our heads around. War and battle language prompts different responses than it did 2000 years ago and we need to acknowledge that when we approach a reading like this.

If I ask *you* ‘what is prayer?’ what’s *your* answer? Do you see it as part of a battle against evil? Other ideas?

.....

Here are some answers given by other people:

- Even when things go wrong, prayer can work it out
- You don’t learn – you already know it naturally
- I think they dissolve like a fire smoke – the smoke goes up and you can’t see it or know where it goes
- Eyes shut help you get close to God
- Prayer gives meaning
- After a while of talking to Jesus, everything bad is out of your brain
- With your problems, God just gives you a hint of how to fix it up
- Prayers come from the heart
- Thanking God makes your life easier

Who do you think shared those thoughts on prayer? Primary aged children. Christian kids, Jewish and Muslim kids talking about prayer as part of a PhD research project. So much wisdom to be shared. This is precisely why we need to listen to all ages.

Another question. Can you remember actually being taught to pray? These aren’t trick questions by the way. I was – I was taught the rosary.

Researchers into children's spirituality have discovered that even children who have never had any connection or link with church or anyone who attends church, they still pray. They may not say they pray to God because they may never had been told about God in the way we understand God, but they pray to something Other. They pray because it brings them comfort, it soothes them, it gives them some hope. Typically, they pray about things like bullying at school, about family breakdowns, about situations they feel are outside of their control.

Isn't that interesting. Depending on the researcher, between 60 and 80% of children say they are aware of the presence of God, and yet we still treat children as vessels into which we need to pour knowledge.

Let's go back to our reading.

The author of Ephesians has listed in previous chapters all the ways we are blessed and equipped by God to do God's work and be the church. When he talks about being *watchful*, it means to stay awake to temptation (just like all those parables of Jesus – sleeping bridesmaids and the like); it means to be aware that we need to persevere in prayer and not become lax in our spiritual discipline. If you're feeling guilty right now, join the club. We can all do more.

We now know, following the trivia night, there are 150 psalms in the Bible. The psalm are prayers – poems and songs, but all prayers. What are they about?

- Creation
- Thanksgiving
- Seeking help
- Seeking hope

Some are even angry and they express anger, but there are a good chunk of the psalms which are prayers to God about situations the psalmists feels they have no control. So they pray to God for help and hope.

Third question. I'm making you work today. Think about this silently in your head, what do you pray about most? Honestly, most of my prayer time is spent asking for help.

I don't know what you're like, and setting aside the utter fiasco of this week, but there are situations in the world that overwhelm me. The children in offshore detention who are so young and so vulnerable and yet they speak of suicide their lives are so devoid of hope. For people to be so desperate that they set fire to themselves. What can I do about that? That's out of my control.

I've been up at synod a fair bit in the last few months. On my way from Flinders Street to Little Collins Street, there are so many sleeping bags and people sitting in shop doorways. And yes, I'll go and buy them a coffee and a sandwich or I'll give them some money, but that's a drop in a huge ocean. I'm just some chick from a lovely home on the Mornington Peninsula facing the reality of what life is like for some people. And how anyone can survive on the streets without resorting to drugs or alcohol, I simply don't know. I feel overwhelmed. It's all out of my control.

Do you ever feel like that? Are there situations like that for you?

We can feel hopeless, unsure about what to do for the best, wanting to help but not sure how to. And then we listen to the wisdom shared, in this case, by children:

- Even when things go wrong, prayer can work it out
- Prayer gives meaning
- With your problems, God just gives you a hint of how to fix it up

God gives you a hint of how to fix it up. Hold onto that thought because I'm going to invite Sharon up here now.

I was recently listening to Sharon speaking about prayer in a meeting and I have invited her to share what she spoke about with you as I found her words really helpful.

Sharon

Firstly, prayer is very often about need – our need and the need of others. When we pray, we open up more to the need of others and think less of our own need. We become more aware when we set aside time to think about others.

Secondly, prayer is about being in communion with God and each other. We now have the image of Sharon with her candle remembering those for whom she has been asked to pray. Solitary prayer as she's on her own often, and yet it is communal prayer because others elsewhere are sitting with the prayer list praying in their own way. Communal because we are with God, in communion with God and each other.

Thirdly, when we pray, we join the voices of others who are also praying, and those voices become louder and louder until they drown out that which is not of God. The voice of darkness is pressed down and not permitted to become the only voice we hear. When we pray, we don't ask God to fix it for us, we ask God (to quote that child) to give us a hint of how to fix it ourselves. We pray to God to be inspired and equipped to be the hands and feet of God in the world.

Prayer gives us space. Rather than act in haste and make quick decisions about issues, even though that is often our contemporary corporate culture which churches are increasingly drawn to, we must only act once we have prayed for guidance and inspiration. The Spirit is there to help but we must stop and acknowledge that we need the Spirit's guidance.

We don't live like that early Christian community with the constant threat of physical violence. So the battle imagery is a little lost on us or misunderstood by us. But we do fight different battles – we fight to halt climate change, to remove refugee children from detention, to feed and house vulnerable people, to not be taken in by politicians as they move the deckchairs on the Titanic. We have battles to fight too, battles over the things that threaten to overwhelm us.

Prayer soothes us, comforts us and gives us hope so that we can face that which overwhelms us knowing that God is with us. We take our own needs and the needs of others to God in prayer so that we can be inspired and equipped to be the hands and feet of God meeting those needs.

We act, of course we do. We don't sit there hoping God is going to come and rescue us. But first we pray. We pray for the Spirit's guidance and wisdom so that our decisions and actions are rooted in God's grace and mercy. We pray that we are aligned to God so that our actions are inspired only by God and not by self-interest, greed, colonialization, and not by hunger for power.

We pray that all we do begins with God, ends with God, and is the manifestation of God in between.

For the Ephesians, there was a specific battleground and prayer was their armour. Prayer is our armour too – **our** battles are the situations that threaten to overwhelm us, and within ourselves, the battle against our own self-interest and our human hunger for power.

Let's pray:

From the corners of worry and fear,
from the shadows where we huddle with our doubts,
God calls us to this place of sanctuary
where we can draw from Love's deep wells.

In every moment where we look for strength to continue,
in every time wonder if faith is worth it,
Jesus calls us to this time
where we can welcome the peace given to us.

In every person who embraces us with acceptance,
in every touch that offers healing and hope,
the Spirit calls us to see those around us
as God's beloved, our sisters and brothers of grace.