

“Be strong and courageous.” “Be strong in the Lord.” Both this evening’s readings speak to us across the centuries with a shared theme: strength for a calling that feels bigger than we are. Life involves struggle, and the writers of Joshua and Ephesians acknowledge this. At the beginning of the book of Joshua, Israel stands at a threshold. Moses, the great leader of the Exodus, has died and his assistant Joshua is being commissioned to lead the people into the promised land. It’s a time of leadership transition, uncertainty, and daunting responsibility – and we all know how difficult that is – and Joshua needs courage rooted in God’s presence. In the letter to the Ephesians, the writer uses the language of warfare as a metaphor to describe the Christian life, not as a battle against people but against forces that limit and deform human flourishing. What I think is comforting for us is that both passages frame struggle as part of faithfulness, not failure.

Joshua’s context is concrete: it’s geographical, it’s political, and it’s communal. His role will be to enable the people to fulfil the conditions for entering into the land, taking possession of it, and flourishing there. He has to help them to fulfil the covenant which God made with them at Sinai all those years ago. And Joshua needs courage to do this: to face opposition from the Canaanite peoples already living in the land, to live by the covenant teachings, and to walk with a God who may lead in unexpected ways.

The context for the Christians in Ephesus is interior, ethical, spiritual, and yes, it’s communal too. Unlike Joshua’s people, they’re not engaged in a literal war, in fighting other people to conquer a territory. For them, and for us, it’s not about proving ourselves right in some sort of culture war. Our struggle is about resisting whatever diminishes life, standing against injustice, deceit, and dehumanisation. Standing against evil. We don’t have to get hung up on the old terminology to identify with the vulnerability the Ephesians’ demonology expresses: evil exists and we’re called to resist it. We need courage – a courage rooted in God, not in aggression – to choose truth over spin and fake news, compassion over bitterness and apathy, hope over despair. The list of “armour” offered to the Ephesians – who would all have been familiar with the body armour of a Roman soldier – is non violent: truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, God’s word, and prayer. These are virtues, not weapons.

What are we fighting today? Like Joshua and his fellow Israelites we’re fighting fear and uncertainty. We face unknowns in society, the church, and the world. We don’t know what the future will bring but we suspect that society may be more unequal, and the world (unless we act soon to address global warming) will be a good deal hotter than it is now. The temptation is to retreat into paralysis and self protection. God says to us, as God said to Joshua, “do not be frightened or dismayed: I will be with you.”

What are we fighting today? Like the Christians in Ephesus we’re fighting misinformation, self-deception, slipping into an easy cynicism or feeling pressured to say what is expedient rather than what is true. Truth is the first casualty of war, of hatred. When we get scared we stop listening to others. We go on the defensive – afraid to be vulnerable, to speak our own truths in love or gently to confront others. But we’re called to resist the slow creep of untruth.

We're fighting the erosion of compassion. Our gospel, the good news we carry to those around us, is a gospel of peace. We are fighting against letting our hearts harden into indifference or cynicism, fatigue that makes empathy feel costly, and the habit of seeing people as problems, not neighbours. We are fighting despair dressed up as realism, the numbness that makes us feel that nothing can change. We're called not to frantic activity but to the spiritual attentiveness that helps us notice what God is doing around us, in us, and through us.

The armour of God is a pattern for modern courage. Knowing God's truth helps us resist spin and self deception. Righteousness – which is really all about justice – is something that should be close to our hearts, part of all our dealings with others and with the world around us. It's integrity in our daily choices. Peace is the invitation to be people of reconciliation and right relationships wherever we are. Faith is when we trust God when – maybe especially when – the outcome is unclear. The helmet of salvation carries a sense of security and hope, the basis for our trust in God; it reminds us we are known, loved, and healed by God. Thinking of the word of God as a sword is a traditional image, but it's not necessarily an aggressive one. It's a metaphor for really getting to the truth of things, cutting through the garbage that gets in the way. It's an invitation to let scripture shape our imagination, and to reveal to us the mind and heart of Christ. And that reminder to pray – for ourselves and for one another. All of these things are not weapons for conquest, but practices that shape a Christ-like community in our modern world. We are in this together you and I. This is communal.

And this is what our unfamiliarity with a Roman soldier, standing there in all his armour, makes us miss. Because it's not about "a" Roman soldier. You didn't often see a single Roman soldier on his own. They were part of a legion, and that was made up of smaller units – cohorts, centuries, bodies of men. This is a hugely collective metaphor – in the Greek, every verb is plural: you all stand, you all pray, you all put on. That's how a Roman army functioned – many trained and disciplined soldiers moving and fighting as one. Groups of people, wearing the same uniform, carrying the same weapons. All these struggles are communal. The uncertainty, the untruth, the indifference – all the things we're fighting against, we're fighting against *together*.

And there will be times when this calling feels bigger than we are. We need courage to step into it. Both this evening's readings emphasise that courage is not self-generated. We needn't dredge up strength from inside ourselves: it comes from God being with us. Joshua's strength comes from God's abiding presence. The strength offered to the Ephesian community comes from being "in the Lord and in the strength of his power." Our struggle isn't some sort of heroic striving but cooperating with the God who calls us, equips us, sustains us, and goes with us. Courage comes from God, and it comes to us together.

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