

The Whole Armour of God

Sermon preached by Anthony Freeman at Holy Cross, Crediton, on 23/8/2009

“Our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood, but ... against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (*Ephesians* 6.12). So says St Paul — or more likely one of his followers writing in his name — in this morning’s New Testament lesson (*Ephesians* 6.10–20). It’s stirring stuff all right, but is it true? Or perhaps I should say, in what sense — if any — is it true?

Well there is one sense in which it is definitely not true. At least, there is one sense in which it is definitely at odds with a fundamental claim about God made in the Bible, and therefore may safely be assumed by Christians to be untrue. To see why this is so, we need to go back to the Old Testament, and yet again I am forced to bewail the willful neglect of the Old Testament by today’s Church, both in its public worship and in the training of its ministers.

This language of spiritual warfare belongs to a worldview in which good and evil are ranged against each other in perpetuity, and in which this archetypal moral dualism provides the only lens through which all life can be properly interpreted. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all share something of this malevolent vision where cosmic good and transcendental evil are depicted as being in mortal combat at every level of the universe and at human experience, from international relations, through social values, to the yearnings of the individual heart.

This violent metaphor of cosmic warfare had its origins in ancient Mesopotamia and was energized by Zoroastrian influences from the sixth century BC, when the Persian empire gained political domination of the known world. This is when it infected post-Exilic Judaism and so entered the Biblical tradition, notably in the Jewish book of Daniel and later in the Christian Revelation of St John the Divine. From there it has grown to become the Master Story of western culture. We instinctively interpret life as a battle. Star Wars movies and Harry Potter are its spiritual heirs just as much as are George W. Bush’s “axis of evil” and America’s firebrand tele-evangelists.

I have always found this aggressive account of reality disturbing and at odds with the deeper message of the Bible, namely that God is the sovereign creator and that he saw all that he had made and behold it was very good. But I felt a certain timidity at speaking out against such a widespread and apparently Biblical view of the universe. I was therefore much cheered, when asked a few years ago to review a four-volume work titled *The Destructive Power of Religion*, to find my views shared by its editor, Harold Ellens, who is well-qualified in the matter, being a Presbyterian theologian and ordained minister as well as a professor of psychology and a former colonel in the US Army. In his introduction he first outlines the picture of “spiritual forces of evil” much as I have done, and then proclaims that this “primal archetype of our understanding” is a huge mistake, “reflecting a schizoid misunderstanding of the real way things are”. The whole notion that evil is cosmic and that reality is split along a moral fault line from top to bottom is, he says, “profoundly untrue”.

I am sure that Ellens is absolutely right both in his analysis of the situation and in his judgment upon it. As a Christian minister I too reject the idea that Evil is an independent self-existing person or force roaming the universe. Evil comes into being where and when human individuals do wicked things, nowhere else. We cannot pass the buck either to the devil or to spiritual forces in high places. It’s down to us. So here is one interpretation of our text from *Ephesians* and the “whole armour of God” that is not true. Now let’s see in what way it is true.

Our starting point is God’s sovereign goodness: “And God saw everything that he had made and behold it was very good” (*Genesis* 1.31). Other creation myths in the ancient near-east depicted the act of creation as a battle between a creator god trying to bring order and an opposing power bent on causing chaos and disaster. The Bible is totally different. God creates by his sovereign word: “God said Let it be so ... and it was so” sums up the whole thing (see *Genesis* 1). Where a few traces of the older creation stories can be detected, they only serve to point up how different is the temper of the biblical account.

For instance, even the serpent in Eden — the nearest we come to a negative force in God’s creative design — is a far cry for the primordial monster opposing the creator in other religious tales. If we stick to the *Genesis*

story (see *Genesis* 3), and forget the later apocalyptic embellishments, the serpent is no battling dragon, but more of a lounge-lizard: first sweet-talking Eve, and then slinking away with his tail between his legs — or rather his belly cleaving to the dust — when the God, whose creature he is, rebukes him and sends him packing.

No-one is saying bad things don't happen, or that people never do wicked things, but the central core of biblical teaching does insist that in all this God's sovereignty is not compromised by this and the goodness of his creation is not ultimately in peril. This is not an easy line to sell. When things are going badly at home — as any politician will tell you — the best thing to do is to blame an enemy abroad. The same applies in religion. When things are going badly for "us", it can't be "our" God's fault, there must be "spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" to take the blame. But this was never the way for the great prophets of the Old Testament, nor for the God in whose name they spoke. When Israel got invaded, or plague struck or the crops failed, the blame was always laid squarely at their own door.

Bad things happened to them because they had disobeyed the Lord's commandments — to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with their God — and as a result of their own misbehaviour, their own God allowed them to be punished. There was no rival god or devil opposing the God of Israel. Everything that happened to his people happened at his bidding. The greatest of the writing prophets, who composed the second part of the long book we know as *Isaiah*, was the one to set out most clearly and starkly the logical outcome of believing in one sovereign God. In that God's name he said:

"I am the Lord, and there is none else. I form the light and create darkness: I make peace and create evil: I the Lord do all these things" (*Isaiah* 45. 6–7).

But if this is the case, if God is in total charge, if there is no "war in heaven" between alleged forces of light and darkness, then what about "the whole armour of God"? Why do we need it? Who are we fighting? Well look again at the list: the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit "which is the Word of God". Now leave out the military metaphors and just concentrate on the key words: truth, faith, righteousness, salvation, the gospel of peace and the Word of God. Not exactly a bellicose list of qualities; much more like the words used by Paul and other biblical writers again and again to describe the character of the one who lives a godly life.

So if we do want to think of life as a battle — and I still find it a perverse metaphor compared with others no less biblical, such as the journey — at least let us acknowledge that it is within each of us that the struggle takes place. The whole armour of God — truth, faith, and the rest — are the God-given means by which we strive to live well, and these same qualities and virtues are also the goal of our endeavours.

Reference:

The Destructive Power of Religion: Violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (4 volumes)
Edited by J. Harold Ellens
(Praeger Publishers, 2003)