

**'Ephesians Armour'**

As some of you already know, I spend a fair amount of my time on TikTok. If you're not sure what TikTok is, it's an app you can get on your phone, where everyone, across the world, shares videos, and you can like each other's videos, or comment on them, or send the videos to other people.

Usually it's just harmless fun, I look at a lot of videos of other people's dogs, stuff like that. But a few days ago one video went viral, with millions of views.

This video went viral, because it was an American husband and wife, who said in the video that the husband always brings his gun to church, in case they ever need to protect their church.

As I'm sure you can all imagine, this got quite a reaction. People generally thought this was an insane thing to do.

Of course there's all sorts of factors in a situation like this, like America's stance on guns, and cultural attitudes towards religion, but I think tying into this situation is a certain way of reading the Bible, which can end in extreme examples like bringing a gun to church.

And it's reading passages like our section from Ephesians this morning, about taking up the whole armour of God, to engage in those struggles against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, and reading them in a very certain way, which can create this battle mindset, this conviction that we must be ready at all times for warfare, and for violence.

Of course, we are not innocent of this mindset over here in Europe. From the Crusades in the mediaeval era, through to the transatlantic slave trade in the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the colonisation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Christians have used passages in the Bible, which can appear violent at first glance, to justify all sorts of actions. We do not have a squeaky clean history, and we forget that at our peril.

Well Pip, you're all thinking, if our passage in Ephesians doesn't say we should be bringing guns to church, and if it doesn't say we should commit violence against those we think deserve it, what does it say, then?

Well I'm glad you all asked.

First of all, let's look at this bit of Ephesians in context.

**The letter of Ephesians** covers quite a lot of different stuff, but one thread it has flowing through it, is power. It keeps coming back to this idea of power.

**The letter, in chapter one**, thinks about the great, cosmic power of God the Father: 1.20 says:

***'God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come.'***

Big scale stuff, right?

**Chapter four then talks about the body of Christ**, and has that well-known bit of ***'The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ...'***

It goes on to say 'speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body...is equipped...'

So still big scale stuff, but we're gone from thinking about the cosmos, to us humans as the body of Christ. Christ, as the head, is the one where all the power comes from, and we are to heed that power, and the Spirit

gives us gifts for us to fulfil.

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**Chapters five and six** then shrink this perspective down even more, to think about who in the household should hold power, and that's where we find those difficult passages about wives obeying their husbands, children obeying their parents, and slaves obeying their masters. But even there, husbands are told **'to love your wives, just as Christ loved the church'**, and for masters and slaves we are told **'you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality'**.

So as the letter of Ephesians goes on, this idea of power gets more specific, going from the cosmos, to the Body of Christ, to the household, but the source of the power always stays the same. No matter what the situation is, the power always comes from God. No matter if we're considering something as big as life over death, or as small as who should listen to who at the dinner table, the power always stems from God, and how God wants it being used.

We then, finally, arrive at our passage today, which is of the individual, and we are told **'Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil'**.

Note that it is the armour of God. Even for the individual, the armour, and the power it provides, is of God.

Let's think about the individual pieces: the belt of truth; the breastplate of righteousness; shoes that will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace; the shield of faith; the helmet of salvation; and finally the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, the Word of God – none of these things belong to us, they are all of God. None of these things can be owned by us, because every single one is a gift from God, given to us only because of his grace.

So while the greater analogy, the bigger picture, may be one of armour and warfare, the details are actually all about gifts, and grace, and peace.

As I was writing this sermon I couldn't help but think of the anti-racism protests that happened after the riots earlier this month.

The riots were ugly, and wrong, and shameful.

**But in response, thousands of people put on the armour of God.**

In Liverpool, when hundreds of people gathered outside an asylum office, to support refugees and immigrants, they were holding the shield of faith.

In Accrington, where people came out of the pubs to hug gathered Muslims on the town's streets, there were the shoes of the gospel of peace.

And in London, Bristol, and Newcastle, where thousands gathered to chant 'refugees are welcome here', there was the breastplate of righteousness.

That, is the power which comes from God. That is the fight against the spiritual forces of evil. Forget guns, forget fighting violence with violence, forget escalation in the name of pride, the true power in those moments were people loving their neighbour, so that the love of God could abound.

So, my friends, remember – **'be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of his power'**, because through God's grace, nothing is impossible.