

## ***FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST***

***1 Kings 8:1, 6, 10-11, 22-30, 41-43; Psalm 84; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:59-69***

As we see on our TV screen the destruction, the devastation and the loss of life that war brings, we realize that war is ugly, brutal, bloody, destroying property and lives. And yet, today's reading from Ephesians talks about battles and war. Paul paints a military picture and talks about taking up weapons, fighting battles, resisting the enemy. What do Paul's images of battle have to do with the religion of the Prince of Peace? We live in a society that is addicted to violence. Is it necessary for the church to talk about weapons, battles, and being strong in the Lord?

Before we tackle these questions it's worth noting that the armour described by Paul is for defensive purposes. The "soldiers" are supplied with appropriate armour that will enable them to hold their ground. The armour is to protect these "soldiers" from the lunging and attacking blows of their enemy. Let's get this into perspective and take an example.

It's Sunday morning and we drag out of bed. The kids are told to get up, get breakfast and then dressed, not once but twice, maybe more times. We finally get everyone in the car and head to church. On our way we see the neighbours hitching up their boats and trailers, loading picnic gear, or putting their golf gear into the trunk of their cars. Others are sitting out on the patio drinking coffee and enjoying a leisurely breakfast, or out in the garden enjoying the time to just putter around. As we observe all of this we ponder the question, "Why am I going to church?"

Why aren't I spending time relaxing and doing the things everyone is doing on a beautiful day?"

As we drive to church we are beginning to feel the odd one out. We begin to feel out of step with the rest of the people in our neighbourhood. When we tell our friends that we go to church, we can't help but notice the raising of the eyebrows, the look that says, "Really. You're the first person I know who actually goes to church on Sundays" or "I would never have taken you to be the religious kind". Or the faint smile that silently says, "You poor thing. I wouldn't have believed that you would fall for that religious stuff."

We get the distinct impression that the world is marching to the beat of a different drummer than we are. As we meet and talk with people we realize that our values are based on something different than everyone else. We struggle with the whole idea that, because of our Christian faith, there are some things we simply cannot agree with, even though everyone else says that it's all right. We find ourselves wondering how people with no faith are able to face things like permanent disability, hard times, and even death. We trust in God's love and goodness; our faith has been an important factor in our life, so how do people who don't have this faith cope? We find ourselves disagreeing with people who run others down, gossip, take a position that is so opposed to what we believe, or criticize those who are trying to do good. It may happen that there is so much that we disagree with in a person's attitude, that we end up saying nothing because we are so overwhelmed, and don't know where to start. Many of us were born into a world where the situation was so different when it came to religion and faith, where Christians seemed secure and were a powerful influence in their communities. First and foremost Sunday was for church. The

kids in Sunday School classes were the kids we went to school with every day of the week. Parents didn't worry if their children would grow up to be Christian - that is Church of England, as they referred to themselves. There was no New Age Movement, no multi-culturalism, no eastern religions. All the shops were closed on Sundays. There was no thought of doing on Sunday what could have been on Saturday. What could have been more ideal?

Back then one wouldn't have had the faintest idea that being a member of the church was going to be as difficult as it is today.

And that's where the problem began, we are locked in a struggle. The church and its members, put down their armour, and became vulnerable to attacks from the outside.

Today Christians are ignored, ridiculed, dismissed by our culture. For a large part, people simply don't know what the church is and what it does, they don't have a clue about Jesus and the Christian faith, and are too self-consumed in the unimportant things, to make the effort to believe or disbelieve. Our world recognizes how different and strange the Christian faith is, and undermines it by simply ignoring it. The world has declared war upon the Gospel in the most subtle of ways, so subtle that sometimes we don't know we're losing the battle until it's too late. In the oddest of ways, the Gospel brings about a head-on collision with many of our culture's most widely and deeply held beliefs and values. Being a Christian today is neither natural nor easy.

The battle we are engaged in is for our souls. If we were fighting against humans only, then we would have a fair chance, but when the enemy is Satan, then we don't have a chance at all to stand our ground by ourselves. Satan is determined to win the day, and win our souls for eternal damnation. Paul tells the

Ephesians, and us, that God gives us the weapons and the armour we need in this battle.

In such a world, what we do here on Sunday becomes a matter of life and death. Sunday at worship is the one time in the week when we get together to hear what God has to say, to be renewed and strengthened for the week ahead through the forgiveness of our sins, to pray together, encourage one another, to put on again the armour of truth, faith, the Gospel of peace, and the Holy Spirit that God gives to protect us.

Satan wins a battle every so often, but in Christ we have won the war. He died on a cross to win the day for us. When we let God down and fall victim to the temptations of Satan and sinful natures we have complete victory through Jesus.

However, we cannot let our guard down. Satan is still trying to draw us away from Christ. God has given us the armour we need, namely: truth, righteousness, the Gospel of peace, faith, salvation, the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. He has also given us the victory through Jesus Christ.

**AMEN.**