

**Standing against oppression transforms it**  
Sermon by Andy Wurm, Pentecost 14, August 26<sup>th</sup> 2018

Today's N.T. reading is from a letter of St. Paul, written from prison in Rome, or more precisely, under house arrest, with a guard. He ended up there because of a conflict with religious authorities in Jerusalem, over taking a Gentile friend into the temple, which was a crime punishable by death. Following that he was imprisoned by King Herod (Jewish ruler and Roman puppet). After two years without resolution, he appealed to Roman law and so was taken to Rome.

Paul became subject to the oppressive power of his religion, and the Roman Empire. With insight reinforced by that experience, he writes to Gentile Christians how faith in Christ can help them not only survive, but triumph over oppressive power which dominates their lives.

Like in Paul's day, we are subject to the power of organisations, institutions, nations, cultures and other collective bodies. That power can be and is often used for good – to create, build up and help people flourish, but it can also oppress, de-humanise, control and even destroy human beings. Therefore, Christianity describes humanity as created good, but fallen: there is a certain goodness about us, but we also remain sinners.

Some forms of Christianity are very individualistic – obsessing whether people are right with God, meaning whether or not they are 'saved' and going to heaven. The New Testament writers however, are not only interested in people, but are also concerned with collective bodies of people, such as nations, cultures, organisations, companies, institutions and their relationship with God. These are created good, but fallen. Describing them as created doesn't mean God personally sculptured each one out of the earth, but that they are not divine, so their existence is limited, their ability to create human experience or define what it means only comes from God, as does their authority to say what is right or the way things should be and their power is dependent, relying on public support or violence. The most significant factor in all that is they can be challenged. This insight and the freedom it gave to people was one of the great attractions of early Christianity. It meant people living under the spell of the Roman Empire, believing it to be the divinely-sanctioned, permanent power over their lives, having ultimate say over the way things should be, were given an alternative. It's like the realisation decades ago that women don't have to accept the role society had given them, or slaves in the US realising they were not inferior human beings created by God for service to others.

In today's passage, Paul talks about various forms of power and describes them as the ways of the devil. He then goes on to list *rulers, authorities, cosmic powers and spiritual forces of evil*. In listing them, he's really alluding to the bigger list which includes all suprahuman powers. That means all forms of power which are humanly created, but kind of have a life of their own. Culture is an example. We generate it, but it also shapes us, so it's more than human, it's suprahuman. Some suprahuman powers are good and some are not. Many are both. Paul refers to suprahuman powers that oppress as spiritual forces of evil. They are never disembodied spirits, but always express themselves through material form. So, for example, racism presents in people's attitudes and actions, as well as laws and traditions.

Sometimes we come across individuals who are hostile, but there is much to be said for Paul's view that our real struggle is not against what he calls 'blood and flesh', in other words, individuals. So, for example, when you go into the government office to pay your car registration and have to pay a fine because you are one day overdue, your struggle is not with the person serving you, but with the big, impersonal (suprahuman) bureaucracy, that has no interest in you.

The recent *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* has exposed how institutions such as churches can use their power against individuals in order to protect themselves. *Created good, but fallen*. Virtually every day we are subject to destructive spiritual forces which oppress or undermine our humanity.

As Christians, Jesus calls us not to fight, but to transform things that oppress and diminish, into things which uplift and nurture humanity. And to do it, Paul suggests using what he calls *the whole armour of God*. Not our strength or amour, but God's. In other words, not fighting evil in the usual way people do. So what does it mean to use *the armour of God*?

The first thing is we need to stand firm when we are attacked. That's one of the first lessons in wrestling - stand so you can't be knocked down. Then Paul says to put on the 'breastplate of righteousness'. Righteousness is to do with 'being right with God' and God assures us we are, so we have that as a foundation upon which to stand against attack. No matter what we are told, in God's eyes, we matter. We are not just economic units, potential sources of income. We are not just voters to manipulate allegiance from. We are not just how society defines us. We are individuals, loved by God, in our complexity.

Then Paul says to fasten the 'belt of truth'. Truth is one of the greatest weapons against spiritual forces which oppress. Naming the bully, naming the truth, exposes them. Spend a few moments listening to the *Royal Commission into Banking and Financial Services* and you'll hear a fair bit of that. No person, no company, no nation, no religion, no organisation or institution, no bank, ever wants to appear self-serving, because it will lose support. The most powerful support is always unconsciously given, and better still is when that support is given in the belief it is in the interests of those who give it. Most people caught up in buying more than they need, for example, would believe they are satisfying their own desires, and be oblivious to the fact that they are being run by consumerism.

Paul also suggests wearing the 'helmet of salvation'. One way to think of that is to protect yourself against destructive messages we're sometimes fed, such as those telling us the future is hopeless, security should be our main concern, scarcity demands that we hoard as much as we can at other's expense, or the more we adopt the American way of life, the happier we'll become. Spending time in silence, away from such messages helps, but also does celebrating and living in accord with the generosity and grace of God, who never abandons us.

Paul calls us to wear for shoes 'whatever helps you proclaim the gospel of peace'. Learning to make peace is a powerful weapon against oppression. Skills of non-violently asserting yourself and standing up for others are needed here. There are alternatives to violence for resolving conflict and violence doesn't actually solve conflict anyway. The 'shield of faith', which Paul encourages us to employ, involves orienting ourselves towards God, instead of towards how we are being told to live, if it is oppressive. For example, being grateful for what we have, counteracts the drawing power of forces which drive us to want more, or to resent what we don't have. Paul's images are drawn from Roman fighting units, whose shields overlapped, providing extra protection. In the same way, finding support from each other's faith makes us much stronger and able to withstand attack.

The 'sword of the Spirit' is the only active weapon Paul refers to. As we listen to the Spirit of God, who dwells within us, one thing we hopefully hear is a constant encouragement to love ourselves. The Spirit may ask us 'what are you doing to love yourself today?' That's not about feeling nice about yourself, but, for example, how are you preventing yourself from being a victim in your current circumstances?

Lastly and no less important than the rest, is prayer. *Pray in the Spirit at all times*, Paul encourages us. It means opening ourselves to the Spirit who is already praying in us: spending time to allow the Spirit who dwells in us to attend to what oppresses us and guide our response to it.

All of this can seem rather heavy, but each day we engage with oppressive spiritual forces, encountered in individuals, collective bodies, such as institutions and their rules or traditions, in social, economic and political practices. We can counter their negative influence upon us by remembering who the true Power to give life is and by living in ways that affirm the life that Power gave and continues to want to create with us.