

K.T. Reflection

"Put on the whole armour of God"
by The Reverend Sir Knight Frederick A. Shade

The apostle Paul was a great champion and ambassador for the Christian Church, and with great enthusiasm he spread the Good News among both Jews and the Gentiles throughout Asia Minor and the Mediterranean basin.

We are all familiar with how his conversion to the Christian faith came about on the road to Damascus, but we should also remember that Paul had numerous spiritual encounters with the risen Christ during his (Paul's) ministry. So what Paul wrote was not based only on his personal belief and faith in the Lord (it is unlikely that he actually met Jesus during our Lord's ministry), but more especially on his personal encounters with Him. This should be borne in mind when we reflect on this section of Paul's letter to the people of Ephesus.

There are a few puzzles with this letter. First, the style and language is different than Paul's other letters e.g. Galatians. This has cast doubt on Paul as the author, but the early Church fathers were absolutely convinced the letter was written by him, that it was written during his imprisonment in Rome c. 60-61 AD, and that it was the last of his letters from prison. The second issue is that the two words "at Ephesus" do not appear in the earliest examples of this letter, and perhaps it never had a place name. It is thought that a 2nd century scribe added these two words to make it conform more closely to Paul's other letters. The letter reads more like a sermon, and it is therefore more likely to have been intended for general distribution throughout Asia Minor with a blank left in its title to be filled in as the messenger handed over the particular copy to the church. I think this is the most reasonable explanation. We can now put aside the issue of date and authorship of the letter.

The section in which we are interested comes at the end of the letter, and it is the apostle's plea to the Christian community to be ready for the spiritual warfare in which they have entered in the name of the Lord. Paul is writing this letter from prison in Rome, as I have already said, and he is most likely to have had a Roman soldier standing nearby when writing it, as he spiritualizes the armor of a soldier in this letter. Of course, Paul and the small communities around the Mediterranean had already experienced trials and tribulations at the hands of others, but Paul was more concerned in this letter with the spiritual powers, the dark forces, the forces of evil which their apostolic work had to confront and hopefully vanquish. Thus, the pieces of armor become metaphors for certain personal and spiritual qualities which a soldier under the banner of the Cross must have if he is to endure the battle and finally triumph. There's nothing like his disciples having a physical reminder before their eyes for something which is an abstract idea or principle!

And now let's turn our attention to the reading used as the Novice is vested as a Crusader.

V.10 "Finally my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might."

We have two exhortations here, the Greek words of the original (strong and might) being synonyms. The NEB translates the verse as "Find your strength in the Lord, in his mighty power."

V.11 "Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil."

Here we have the battle motif introduced. The Christian lives in a world which is rich with God's blessings, but there are also present negative or evil forces, powers which hinder our journey back to God. We are to put on the armor which is in fact God's armor. This idea is not new, as the priest of the Temple in Jerusalem (cf. Isaiah 59:17, Wisdom of Sol. 5:17-20) and the priests of the Christian Church put on "the whole armor of God" when they are about to conduct services. The special vestments worn by the priest at the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, for example, have similar connotations to those Paul attribute to the armor of a soldier of the Cross. (I have written a short paper on the origin and significance of the vestments worn by the priest.)

V.12 "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against wickedness in high places."

The cosmic drama is further outlined here, for we are part of a great battle which takes in the whole of creation - the physical and the spiritual. We are fighting the rulers of darkness, the demonic agencies which are the prime movers behind the events of the world, and this included influencing events which eventually led to the death of Jesus. (Jesus refers specifically to the "prince of this world," and our Lord, who had already been tested by him in the wilderness, knew that this power had influenced the minds of men. cf. John 14:30.)

Angelology, the belief in angels and their influence on sublunary things, was very much part of Hebrew teaching and experience. Paul himself was brought up in this tradition. He was also taught by the greatest rabbi of the time, Gamaliel, who had initiated him into the mystical teachings of the Kabbalah where the angelic powers of the right and left hand are explained in detail. The reason why I mention this here is that Paul understood the nature and hierarchy of angelic powers (cf. Nine orders etc.), and he was equally aware of those other spiritual powers from the dark side (including angels) which he describes as being active in the world.

As darkness is opposed to light, so are these forces implacably opposed to the work of the Church. The phrase "spiritual wickedness in high places" is really referring

to heavenly places where we see the eternal battle continue between the forces of light and the forces of darkness.

V.13 "Wherefore take unto you the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand."

Here the Christian soldier is bidden to take up his battle position with courage, "in the evil day," that is in an age when the Church is under great persecution and when the dark forces are unleashed to destroy it. So, having made all necessary preparations, the soldier of the Cross is ready for battle.

V.14 "Stand, therefore, having your loins girt with truth, and the breastplate of righteousness,"

The belt is a sign of active duty. Its priestly equivalent is the cincture or girdle. The breastplate, covering the heart, is a defense against attack and injury. The Christian soldier has as his breastplate the spiritual quality of righteousness (cf. Is.59:17).

V.15 "and your feet shod with the gospel of peace;"

The feet are equipped with shoes for marching, and the spurs are used to goad the horse into action. The gospel here is, of course, the gospel of Christ, who is the Prince of Peace (cf. 2 Thess. 3:16).

V.16 "above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to withstand the fiery darts of the wicked."

The Latin word for shield (scutum) on which the Greek word (thureos) is based, was a large square shield devised to catch and extinguish ignited arrows. It is a "shield of faith" because of the Christian soldier's faith in the risen Christ and his exaltation over evil powers.

V.17 "And take the helmet of Salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

The helmet of salvation is taken from Isaiah 59:17 where God (YHWH) wears this on his head as he goes forth to vindicate his oppressed people. The rabbis of old applied this to the work of the Messiah when he comes, and the Christian interpretation of Old Testament imagery was a further development of this process.

The sword is wielded with its cutting power when the word of God is preached. In Hebrews ch.4 v.12, we have a significant reference to the power of God's word: "The word of God is quick (living), and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."

It is also interesting to read of the mouth being likened to a sword (e.g. Isaiah 49:2), or a sword issuing or held by the mouth. In Revelations ch.1 v.16, we have an

obvious allusion to the Word of God and the power and majesty of Him, the Lord of Light and Truth, who wields the sword both in heaven and on earth: "And he had in his right hand seven stars and out of his mouth went a sharp two-edged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength."

There are six qualities attributed to the pieces of equipment; righteousness (breastplate), faith (shield), truth (belt), peace (shoes/spurs), salvation (helmet), and word (sword). Each of these words is very important to us as Christians, and they should be placed side-by-side with those which Paul lists as the gifts of the Spirit (I Cor.12:4-11) and those as the fruits of the Spirit (Gal.5:22-23).

The first word is righteousness. This word is used in the Old Testament in two ways. When used in common speech, it means "innocent" in the legal sense. Thus the Messiah will come, and "with righteousness he will judge the poor" (Is.11:4), and "righteousness shall be the girdle of his waist" (Is.11:5). A court of justice in those days was, in theory, "the place of righteousness" (Ec.1:16). Also, it means to be "in the right", rightness, "conforming to a standard." The second use of it is in religious terminology. The ancient Hebrews always thought of righteousness as "corresponding with the will of God." So doing "what is lawful and right" should be understood in the context of what is the will of God. Thus, as the divine will was revealed in the law (Ten Commandments etc.), righteousness was thought of as "obedience to its rules" (Dt.6:25). In the New Testament, the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew translates as righteous, just, justify - hence justification is associated with this word. For Christians, our Lord Christ has as one of his many titles "the King of Righteousness."

The second word or attribute is faith. There are two principle notions in the Greek word *pistis*, the ethical notion of confidence or trust and the intellectual notion of conviction or belief, i.e. a belief held in good faith.

There is a strong Greek influence underpinning many of these concepts in the Old Testament. For Philo, the Greek philosopher, faith is a steady intuition of divine things transcending sense and logic. This Hellenistic sense is used in Hebrews and by Paul in his writings. Contact with Jesus gave this word and other words a greatly increased use and a heightened sense of power. Jesus demanded faith of the recipient, that faith which would make you free etc. His signs, miracles, and wonders were due to faith; "only believe!" He said that faith in his Name could move mountains. Faith is the first of the three theological virtues, Faith, Hope, and Charity (Love) (I Cor.13:13).

In regard to our faith in Christ, the apostle John has different meanings and lessons to convey in his writings. He is saying that the departure of Jesus was needed in order to perfect the disciples' faith (Jn 16:7), that the removal of its earthly supports and breaking its links with the materialistic aspects of Messianism was absolutely necessary. Our Lord said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe" (John 20:29).

To sum up, the Christian faith can be described as the decisive action of the whole inner man - understanding, feeling, and will. For Paul, it is the trustful self-surrender to God in Christ, for faith springs from the intimate relationship between the believer and our Lord. It leads to perfect trust. Many people "believe," but few have "faith" to the degree demanded of us by our Lord.

The third concept presented at the investiture is truth. The word truth is used to refer to different things. For example, in the Old Testament the law forbade the bearing of false witness against one's neighbor. In the New Testament, the law of Christ enjoins us to speak truthfully in our dealings with others (Eph.4:25). In his writings, Paul uses the term "the truth" to describe God's will as it is revealed to man (Rom.1:18, 25) but especially in the gospel of Jesus Christ (II Cor.4:2, Gal.5:7 etc.). "The truth," therefore, becomes synonymous for him with "the gospel" (cf. Eph., Gal. etc.).

In the books of John, other aspects are explored. You will remember the famous question put by the governor Pilate to Jesus: "What is truth?" (Jn 18:38) and that Jesus gave no answer. This lack of response is interpreted as indicating that Jesus knew that Pilate was not interested in the answer, that it was merely a play on words by a cynic and an effort on Pilate's behalf to show that he was in charge, a governor who had a rather Machiavellian approach to his rule. It was an attempt to denigrate Jesus, as if to say "what would you know about truth?"

Yet, Jesus declared that he came into the world to bear witness to the truth (v.37), and the fourth gospel could be described as an elaborate exposition of the nature of truth as revealed by our Lord and of the way in which he revealed it.

John shows that Jesus' mission was, among other things, to reveal to his disciples what is true and what is false, what is real and what is illusory. An understanding of what this truth is, as revealed by our Lord, is the great challenge which is before each of us.

The fourth word is peace. The Hebrew word for peace is Shalom which has the sense of wholeness, health, and security. It is used as a form of greeting, to mean "peace" in the sense of freedom from conflict, and it can mean "peace" in the religious sense of reconciliation with God and the experience of God's grace.

For the Jews, the coming Messianic Kingdom of God signifies the coming of peace throughout the world, of swords being beaten into ploughshares, the restoration of harmony in nature, etc.

In the New Testament, the frequent use of the benedictions and salutations have all of these connotations, the new context of this "peace" and "grace" being that which is bestowed by God through Christ. Paul says frequently "peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Reconciled to God, we are enabled to accept in faith the challenges and experiences of life.

Our Lord is "the Prince of Peace," one of His many titles, as He brings us that peace which is not of this world, that peace which passes and surpasses our human understanding. It is a state of mind, of heart, of tranquility within the soul.

Thus peace is much more than the cessation of hostilities, although that is a good start! It is the (re)establishment of harmony at all levels: physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. Notice that our Lord worked on people at all these levels when healing them and giving them his "peace." The establishment of this new regime within the cave of the human heart is also empowering and liberating. Christ did say that he would make us "free." This peace enables us to be more Christ-like, to be more effective in the world, in helping others, in healing others, and in spreading the gospel of peace.

The fifth word is salvation. This word is a generic term which encompasses many things such as the idea of general deliverance of God. In the Old Testament, the root meaning of the word is "to be broad, spacious," thus salvation is enlargement. This salvation came to them in many and varying guises e.g. in the parting of the seas or victory in battle. Thus salvation was seen sometimes as national, sometimes as individual, but always something which came from God. For the Hebrews, God was involved in absolutely everything they did in their lives.

When the people abandoned God, salvation could only come through a change of heart, through repentance. This is taken up by the prophets in the Old Testament. We see this theme taken up also in the New Testament where "salvation" is linked with a "saviour." Here we find it linked with physical things ("your faith has made you well," literally "saved you") as well as spiritual blessings ("it is He that shall save you from your sins"). Thus Jesus is the "Saviour," the "Healer," the "Liberator."

In apostolic usage then, salvation is the all-embracing name for the blessings brought by the gospel (cf. "the gospel of your salvation" Eph.1:13, "the message of this salvation" Acts 13:26). In fact, the gospels themselves are really an expansion on the concept of salvation through Christ, both for the individual as well as the community as a whole.

Salvation begins on earth in forgiveness, renewal, the bestowal of the Holy Spirit, strength, comfort, guidance, etc. and is perfected in the life everlasting when we are fully united with God the Father. As Christians, we believe that all this is possible only because of the incarnation of the Word, of the work and teaching of our Lord Christ, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

The final term is word. There are really four words which should be taken together; sword, spirit, word, and God. In medieval times, the sword was called "the Arms of Mercy;" the two-sided blade reminded that one must maintain chivalry and justice, the two pillars of the temple of honor. Its point is the point of charity to a fallen foe, its hilt that of justice, etc. There are different ways in which one can describe the sword as metaphor of virtues and qualities required of a Knight. In both the Old

Testament and New Testament the sword is seen as an essential part of the armour for a soldier, both for offence and defense. As already mentioned, in the New Testament the word of God is described as a two-edged sword (Heb.4:12). I have elaborated on the moral and spiritual significance of each piece of the soldier's armor in another article, "In the Center of the Preceptory."

The word spirit in this quotation of Paul refers to the Holy Spirit, i.e. the Spirit of God, thus the sword is a metaphor for the Spirit of God. We usually think of the Holy Spirit only in terms of being the source of life, healing, empowerment, gifts, etc., which is true, but the Spirit is also the agency for change, for building anew. It is thus also a destroyer, the agency of God which cuts away so that new things can emerge. The Hindus have a better understanding of this aspect of God's work in the world in their god Shiva.

As this reading shows very clearly, "word" is linked with God, and so it is not any ordinary word or words that we are dealing with here.

As a generic term, the "word of God" has a long and illustrious history among both Jews and Christians. The Old Testament is revered by both Jew and Christian as "the word of God," and the New Testament is revered by Christians as "the word of God," also, the Jews believed their language to be a sacred language because God spoke to them in Hebrew! Thus, each letter, each word has a specific numerical, moral and spiritual value and meaning. The name of God, that most sacred of words, was especially revered to the point that it was never uttered in ordinary course of conversation. Even the High Priest only uttered it once a year, in the Holy of Holies. Instead, substitute words were used, such as Adonai, Lord.

The Jews also believed that the whole of the Pentateuch, i.e. the first five books of Moses, contained the name of God, from the first to the last letter! We must remember that the name or names of God revealed aspects of his essence, his very being, as the Old Testament shows. This is why Moses asked the Lord at the burning bush what his name is and what name he should use when reporting to the people. This special reverence for the holy name of God continued into the apostolic age and the New Testament, e.g. "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow" (Phil.2:10). So we now come to the time of Christ, the Incarnation of the Word that made the world, and how this is reflected in the writings of Paul in particular. The Gospel, the Good News, is our message from God through Christ. Thus we have the Word spoken, the Word written, and the Word now seen in the person of our Lord and Master.

I think we can say that the term "word of God" is used by Paul in a generic sense, i.e. that it encompassed the words uttered by Jesus and recorded in the gospels and also those teachings and inspired reflections given to them by the gospel writers themselves. The gospels, therefore, contain the word of God.

For Christians, our Lord and Master is the very embodiment of the Word, for He is the Word made flesh and dwelt among us. Of course, it is not as simple as it

sounds, as all this is a great mystery! For this reason, I believe that what in fact we received from our Creator was a portion only of the "glory of God," a fragment of the "word of God," and a glimpse only of "the face of God," for that is all we are capable of receiving. However, it is enough, and we are truly blessed in being given these precious gifts.

The soldier of the cross is now ready to embark on his crusade. He has been given physical, moral, and spiritual armor wherewith to carry out his campaign. By the grace of God, may he triumph in this world, spreading the light of the gospel fearlessly and with love and charity.

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