

Trinity XXI Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins

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One of the funniest pictures of the entire Bible is that of David trying to walk in the armour of King Saul. The young boy had offered himself to take on the veteran Philistine Giant, Goliath. Although everyone doubts the shepherd boy's ability to fight, they are relieved by his offer. They think, "Better him than me. Far worse to send no one to fight Goliath, and appear like cowards, than to send someone and lose."

So Saul welcomes David's offer to take on the giant. In front of all the Israelite army, King Saul takes his choice armour and places it upon the boy, David. First the bronze helmet, then the coat of mail, and finally the royal sword, are given to the boy. But poor David is overwhelmed by the size and weight of the armour, and he can hardly walk. It is like a scene from a television cartoon. You can imagine David, ready to fight a giant, but unable to even walk in

his armour. And then perhaps falling backwards, stranded on the ground, like an upside-down June bug.

We might be feeling the same way, as Paul offers us some heavy-duty armour this morning: belts and metal breast plates, heavy boots, a thick shield, a solid helmet and a mighty sword.

Many in our day find the military language in that Epistle reading off-putting and offensive. But we want to be careful not to miss or dismiss Paul's point - that there is a real, spiritual battle against evil and darkness. We wrestle not against flesh and blood. At the risk of sounding too Canadian, I want to suggest the kind of soldiers we are called to be. For remember, we are signed with the sign of the cross, and prayed over, that we may continue as Christ's faithful soldiers and servants to the end of our life. We are soldiers, but a particular kind of soldier. We are called to be peacekeepers. Our battle is to maintain and extend the peace of Jesus Christ. And

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that is a battle against hatred, lies, self-destruction, ignorance and despair.

Peace really is our subject for this day - what St. Paul calls the Gospel of peace. The Gospel account begins with a man's panic-stricken and hurried trip to find Jesus, whom he hoped might come and heal his dying boy. Jesus is his last resort. He is desperate. You can hear his impatience, when Jesus begins to preach on how genuine faith does not require miracles. "Sir, come down lest my child die." But then something happens, and there is a radical change in this man, as radical as the change in his son. His panic is exchanged for peace. He came to Jesus in desperation, but he goes his way in hope. And on his journey home, that peace and hope are confirmed.

St. John refers to the miraculous healing of the nobleman's son as Jesus' second sign. The first sign was the changing of water into wine at the wedding in Cana. There we see Jesus sharing in one of

the great joys of human and family life. The second sign is the healing of this boy, who was about to die. Here we see Jesus sharing in the deepest sorrow of human and family life.

Now we don't hear and read these miracle stories to excite the exact same expectation of miraculous intervention, whenever a party goes bad or we have a sick child. Christians have had bad parties and even disastrous wedding receptions. And the followers of Jesus Christ have buried millions of sons and daughters, who at the point of death, were not healed.

John refers to this miracle as a sign. It points to something else. It is a mark with a meaning, pointing us to something. What it points to is the kingdom of God and what God is doing in Jesus Christ. It is a sign of the power, love and compassion of God in Jesus Christ, the power of God over every evil, including sickness and death. It is a sign of the will of God for healing and life for his people, which we pray and believe will be done. But it is also a sign

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of what can be achieved in us, when we believe. The man simply took Jesus at his word that day.

While he comes running to Jesus in a panic, something happens. There is a radical change in this man, as radical as the change in his son. His panic is exchanged for peace. He came to Jesus in desperation, but he leaves in hope. The man believed the word that Jesus had spoken unto him, and he went his way. We all, like him, come to Jesus with our anxieties and guilt, our fears and hopes. And if we, too, will believe the word of Jesus, we will find pardon and peace.

For us, peace is the fruit of faith. Peace is fundamentally found in forgiveness and reconciliation, with God through Christ, and with one another through Christ. We have peace with God by faith in Jesus Christ, who died for us. We have peace by trusting God, and by entrusting everything to God in prayer and thanksgiving.

The Epistle tells us not to mistake our enemy; we wrestle not against flesh and blood. Our enemy is not human. Rather, our battle is a spiritual one - in ourselves against despair and all kinds of sin, and in the world against darkness, evil, hatred, lies, oppression and injustice. There is a spiritual battle and a moral struggle in which we are called to engage. If we mistake our enemy and the battle, we will take the wrong arms. For the armament needed for this battle is quite different - truth, the Gospel, faith, salvation, and the word of God.

So what kind of soldiers are we meant to be? Both the Collect and the Epistle speak of peace, and it may be helpful to think of this Christian service as peace-keeping. It is a real battle, dangerous and severe. And in this battle, we fight to preserve and to extend the peace of Jesus Christ. In the struggles that you and I face, we need the firm belt of truth to hold us together. We need to be right with God to protect our hearts. We need the desire to preach the good

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news to motivate us, and to move our feet. We need faith in God that shields us from the devil's attacks and temptations. And finally, we need the Bible to push back the lies and hatred and deceptions of the evil one. All this, with constant prayer, is our common spiritual arsenal.

Saint John himself reminds us, "Greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world." As God encouraged Joshua, so God would strengthen you today, for the battles and struggles ahead in this week and in your life. Be strong and of good courage. We know and believe, in Jesus Christ, in a mercy greater than our sin, in healing that overcomes sickness, in forgiveness and reconciliation that tread down division and brokenness, and in love stronger than death. So brothers and sisters, be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might. **Amen.**