**A life-giving force. August 22 2021 John 6:56-69, Ephesians 6:10-20,**

Even in the face of a global pandemic we also see, each day, frightening scenes of intense political instability, Governments forcibly overthrown, terrorising forces invading new areas, common people seeking every possible avenue to escape their homeland. There are powerful forces at work in our world and history reinforces that humanity has an immense capacity to be deluded, corrupted and manipulated. I noted that Peter made reference last week to the horror of the holocaust, a clear example of the inhumane capacities within humanity.

Bible stories and teaching often resound with militaristic imagery. We recognise that their context was very different to our own in this land, and sometimes we find the images deeply disturbing, even offensive. In our land and our time, we now recognise more subtle abuses of power, and seek to combat these in our communities as we indeed should. We seek peace through negotiation rather than warfare which indeed we should. However, we have also caricatured evil in ways that seem to ridicule its reality or which undermine the human capacity for resistance or change.

The passage we just read from Ephesians contains a strong militaristic image very appropriate to its original audience. We have often lingered over the image of the armour, seeking to analyse each aspect but possibly neglecting its message as a whole. The passage reminds us that we have been given resources that can strengthen and protect uswhen encountering subtle or more apparent manifestations of evil.

Evil is a strong word, generally not used lightly in our age and context. The hesitancy about the use of the word is understandable but it may also have encouraged a disengagement or dismissiveness of the concept of “powerful invisible forces” and the ongoing battle of good and evil in human life and relationships.

For us today in our context we also make poor choices at times, we too can struggle with relationships. “Powerful invisible forces” can affect us, manifesting their influence through jealousy, greed, bitterness, apathy, stubbornness, and arrogance. When we look at these things honestly, we recognise the destructive power of these attributes, they are far from life giving attributes. We are also committed to challenging “evil”, injustice, exploitation, abuse, neglect, racism, and other dehumanising practices in our wider society. We need to insure we do not neglect addressing our attitudes, our battle with powerful, dehumanising, invisible, “evil” forces in our own lives.

By contrast, in the gospel reading for today Peter declares of Jesus, “You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Earlier in this reading Jesus spoke about the Spirit being the source of life. [[2]](#footnote-2) Later in this gospel he states, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Jesus comes as a powerful life giving force in the world. The disciples “**recognise the life-giving quality of Jesus’ words**”.[[4]](#footnote-4) Peter’s statement, “You have the words of eternal life” form a central affirmation in this gospel, like his affirmation in the synoptic gospels “You are the Christ the Son of the Living God.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

So with these two readings we capture something of the battle that we are in. We have a life giving relationship with Jesus on the one hand yet we also continue to encounter other forces which seek to influence us in ways that are not “life-giving”. In this battle we need the strength which God alone can give, hence Paul declares, “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power”.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The gospel can sometimes seem to be described in ways that make it seem like a passive psychological resource which enables people to “feel better” in life. This passage is a stark contrast to such an emphasis it points to life as a follower of Christ as engagement in a battle. A battle in which we are equipped by the “life giving force” of Jesus that we may remain strong in the power of God regardless of the “other forces” which we may encounter obviously or subtly.

So Paul reminds his readers of the resources they have been given to deal with these forces which could derail or side-track them on their journey with Jesus. He reminds them that the gospel (the good news of Jesus), the revelation of God to humanity, has brought them to a place of salvation, and to a place where they recognise the value of truth and righteousness, faith and peace. They are then encouraged to have a key focus on two practices that will strengthen them. They are encouraged to engage actively with “the Word of God” and with prayer. These practices can enable them to actively respond to the challenges they will encounter. These practices can release the strength they will need. These practices are powerful, not because by them we seek to manipulate God (an oxymoron if ever there was one humans manipulating God?) but rather because we thereby put ourselves in a position where we can co-operate with God, in what God is doing.

They are encouraged to engage with the Word of God, with the written word in the Scriptures but also with Christ the living Word. Their lives are to be constantly lived out of an awareness of what God calls them to in the good news of Jesus. They are encouraged to engage in all types of prayer in all times and places, for all people. He asks them to pray very specifically for himself, that despite imprisonment and bondage in chains, he may boldly share the gospel with others, and act as an ambassador for Christ.

These practices may not be commonly viewed as “powerful” activities in the age in which we live, but they form a pipeline to the life-giving force of Jesus operating often invisibly in our world.

*Peter Marshall the famous chaplain to the US Senate told a story about a quiet forest dweller who lived high above an Austrian village along the eastern slopes of the Alps. The old gentle man had been hired many years earlier by a young town council to clear away the debris from the pools of water that fed the lovely spring flowing through their town. With faithful, silent regularity he patrolled the hills, removed the leaves and branches, and wiped away the silt from the fresh flow of water. By and by, the village became a popular attraction for vacationers. Graceful swans floated along the crystal clear spring, farmlands were naturally irrigated, and the view from restaurants was picturesque. Years passed. One evening the town council met for its semiannual meeting. As they reviewed the budget, one man's eye caught the salary figure being paid the obscure keeper of the spring. Said the keeper of the purse, "Who is the old man? Why do we keep him on year after year? For all we know he is doing us no good. He isn't necessary any longer!" By a unanimous vote, they dispensed with the old man's services. For several weeks nothing changed. By early autumn the trees began to shed their leaves. Small branches snapped off and fell into the pools, hindering the rushing flow of water. One afternoon someone noticed a slight yellowish-brown tint in the spring. A couple days later the water was much darker. Within another week, a slimy film covered sections of the water along the banks and a foul odor was detected. The millwheels moved slower, some finally ground to a halt. Swans left as did the tourists. Clammy fingers of disease and sickness reached deeply into the village.Embarrassed, the council called a special meeting. Realizing their gross error in judgment, they hired back the old keeper of the spring . . . and within a few weeks, the river began to clear up.[[7]](#footnote-7)*

Paul gives his readers advice in this passage regarding “keeping the spring” of their lives clean, unpolluted, particularly through the use of prayer and the Word of God. So even now, as we recognise that there are some powerful often undetected influences upon our lives, which can lead us off course, we too need to engage in practices such as prayer and meditating on Scripture to be strengthened in our journey in life.

1. John 6:68b-69 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John 6:63a NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John 10:10b NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. J. Michael Ramsay, *The Gospel of John: New International Commentary Series ,*(Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2010) 414 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Matthew 16:16 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ephesians 6:10 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Charles Swindoll “Keeper of the Spring” in Alice Gray (ed) *Stories for the Heart,* (Gresham, Oregon: Vision House Publishing, 1996) 99 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)