

SERMON: Sunday – 22 August 2021 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Strength in Armour

Ephesians 6:10-20

John 6:59-69

Some of the disciples turned away from Jesus. His teaching was too difficult.

Why might people turn away from Jesus?

What happens to people who turn away?

How can someone begin to follow Jesus then choose to go in a different direction?

Why do followers need to wear protective armour? Is it, at least in part, to help resist the temptation to turn away?

I suppose it wasn't the popular thing to do to follow Jesus back then. And maybe that's not changed much since.

It wasn't a popular choice back then because it was very much a life and death issue. You risked life and death if you were seen to be numbered among the followers of a radical rabbi who appeared to be claiming to be God in the flesh, especially in an empire where the Emperor was god.

Not that Jesus necessarily claimed to be God in the flesh although a statement such as "I and the Father are One" appears to do so.

It's sometimes hard to stand up in the truth.

It's been really hard for the people of Afghanistan to stand up against a growing fundamentalism over the decades. It's very much been a life and death issue for them and looks like it still will be for the foreseeable future.

Much has been said about the Taliban having changed but many, especially women who are able to speak out, believe that's not the case.

Australian journalist, Lynne O'Donnell wrote this week, "the Taliban are drug dealers, murderers, misogynists, widow-makers, child-killers, racists. They have not and will not ever change. Anyone who thought they would simply hasn't been paying attention".

I don't know about you, but my heart breaks when I see poor people desperately try to leave the country of their birth because it just isn't a safe place to be.

We must stand with the people of Afghanistan in praying for and helping them

to create a safe place for all. And in the meantime we must be willing to accommodate those who flee for refuge.

God provided safe places of refuge for those who needed to flee in the ancient story of the people of Israel. Cities of refuge were built into the building of the Promised Land. Moses (Numbers 35) was commanded to build 6 cities of refuge which were to be appointed to the Levites and later Joshua (Joshua 20) was commissioned to ensure these cities of refuge remained in place. And these cities of refuge were primarily to give safe haven for people who had been accused of murder. How much more then do we need safe havens for innocent people at risk from oppressive rulers.

God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in time of trouble (Psalm 46:1).

As Boaz says to Ruth, "May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge" (Ruth 2).

But does living under the shadow of God mean followers of Jesus don't need any other protection?

Not according to Paul and the words of the letter to the Ephesians. Believers are strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power AND are to wear the full armour of God so as to resist the ways of the evil one, who is manifest as the rulers, authorities, cosmic powers of this present darkness and spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Now this isn't an excuse to engage in unnecessary war but an invitation to stand firm. It sounds passive, just to stand firm but it demands active choice and energy. To stand your ground takes effort. And in that standing believers are invited to do two active things - to pray and to carry the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God.

Prayer and God's Word are necessary parts of the armour that followers of Jesus should aim to build into their everyday lives. They are fundamental keys to a flourishing life and they are gifts to us from God the Spirit. Even when we don't feel like it, God's Spirit wants to move us to take up these two things.

As well as to remind us that there are other components of the full armour which God provides - the belt of truth and breastplate of righteousness - in other words make it your aim to live an honest life, try not to tell lies, be open when things go wrong, don't hide away from what's right.

The helmet of salvation - remember that God sent Jesus into the world to save

the world from sin and nothing you or I can do can take that truth away - it must protect our mind - to know that there is forgiveness in and through Christ.

The shield of faith - even as small as a mustard seed, faith can do great things, and will guard against the temptations to fear, doubt, fall away.

And shoes, ready to go with the gospel of peace - in other words, be ready to take the good news and live it out peacefully with your neighbour, and with the foreigner and the stranger and even the enemy.

We pray for peace all the time, and we carry peace with us wherever we go. And God can work with that and bring a peace to prevail which is beyond our understanding. God can do what we can't in making peace happen but we can play our part in being willing to do what we can to bring it about.

I perhaps haven't really answered the questions I raised at the beginning. But I think that the answer is found somewhere among all these words. That somehow, the wearing of the armour which God provides does prevent the falling away from Jesus and indeed, it will work in the other direction, in helping to build faith in the God of Jesus the Christ.

As it did for Simon Peter, who said to Jesus, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

May we grow in our love of God and our faith in Christ.
And may that love and faith overflow into all we are and all we do and say this week and beyond.

Let us pray,
Loving God
Keep us strong in your holy power
Guard us from falling away
Hold us in your loving embrace
As we grow in faith in you
Fill our hearts with your love for others and all creation
In Jesus name
Amen.