Trinity 13B - Joshua 24: 1-2a, 14-18; Ephesians 6: 10-20; John 6: 56-69

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

These are the instructions we have just heard from Paul, written to the Ephesians; and when an evangelical friend of mine, during a period at vicar school when the going got a bit tough for me, exhorted me to mime these actions every morning, I thought she was bonkers. And maybe she is anyway…… Her name’s Ginni, and she works in St Alban’s diocese – avoid her at all costs. 😊

However, we don’t have to take it quite so literally for there to be some good news in here somewhere. And for me, the best advice of all comes in the very next paragraph. It’s about praying.

Whoever you are and whatever your state in life, if you are human, you feel the pressure sometimes. Whether it is the number of unread emails in your inbox, or the demands on your bank account, or the time to help family out with childcare duties, or anything else. We are none of us immune to pressure. Some of us think we thrive on pressure – adrenaline can certainly help to get things done in the short term – but it all takes its toll sooner or later.

And Paul recognises this - of course for the Ephesians, it’s the pressure of withstanding, in first century Ephesus, those who were against the Christians and their way of life – and so Paul uses this fighting imagery to help them to be strong against those who think differently, and against, as he puts is, the devil’s wiles.

**Pray in the Spirit at all times... and persevere in supplication for all the saints** is the bit thatI want to focus on though.

The rest may be a way of visualising whatever stresses we may face in the world we live in, but this is a universal truth, as I see it, which is applicable in any age.

And again, I thought back to my lovely friend Ginni with the phrase Pray in the Spirit. Because it’s not in my tradition to make a big public thing of the moving of the Holy Spirit: I don’t often wave my hands in the air when I sing hymns, I rarely raise my hands high in prayer and I have never spoken in tongues. Doesn’t mean I don’t believe in the power of the Holy Spirit. I absolutely do, and feel its working frequently. Nor does it mean that I think there is anything wrong in any of those public demonstrations. Simply that I come from a branch of the Church of England in which we are much more buttoned up…..repressed even……. And also from a strain of Britishness that struggles with the very public expression of emotion.

But going back to Paul. His indisputable message is that prayer is a gift. A gift from God. And in the same way that we shouldn’t receive a present from someone and just stick it in a dark cupboard and forget about it, so it is with prayer. Having received it as a gift, we need to take it out of its box and use it and celebrate the fact that we have been given it.

But ‘at all times’? That’s hard. With all these pressures of life weighing us down, it’s hard enough trying to fit in the basic living without adding stuff to it. No time to pray in the morning because the alarm clock has gone off and there’s stuff to get on with; no time to pray at night because I fall asleep the second my head hits the pillow… However, if we listen to the whole phrase, the clue is there: pray in the Spirit at all times. Think less in terms of making prayer happen, and more in terms of allowing the Spirit to do it within us. Yes, of course, we pray with words sometimes – apart from anything else, using words as we pray helps to clarify to us what exactly we are praying for and to engage deeply with that. But actually there’s that phrase from Romans 8 – Paul again – that goes: Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedeswith sighs too deep for words.

Sometimes – often even – we don’t have the words – out of distress, or anger, or just sheer tiredness - so we simply sit in the presence of God and let that prayer happen. And in the fulness of time, I hope that prayer will be for me just like breathing – something that happens all the time – that awareness of God so deep that thoughts and words are all held out to him as naturally as breath.

So: a gift from God, and something that we choose to allow to happen through the Holy Spirit. One of the archdeacons elsewhere in our diocese talking about praying being a gift likened it to those moving walkways in airports. We can choose to walk alongside if we want – and we’ll get to the same place in the end, but if we get on it – if we align our attitudes and desires, and our intercessions for others, with the Holy Spirit, then we are carried along, placing ourselves before God and acknowledging our dependence on God.

And of course, like all gifts, we should thank God for it.

The second thing that prayer is, is a gift of grace – for us, of course, but even more, for other people and for the world in general. It helps us to look outwards, not inwards – to focus less on our own issues and thereby to remember that there are others, both close at hand and far off, whose needs are far far more pressing than ours. When Paul talked about supplication for all the saints, I probably need to note that he didn’t mean St Peter or St Thomas or Saint anybody else: ‘saints’ was a word used in the letters and in the Acts of the Apostles to mean all the believers. Which makes us saints too. We are – as they were – the community of the faithful people, praying for ourselves but also for all those others, people we know and people we will never meet, who are in need of our prayers.

To those of you who pray daily, I say: keep it up and always know that your prayers are heard by God. To those of you who don’t, I say: try it, you might like it……but even more, those people for whom you pray might be grateful for it.

When we did the Lent course on prayer, back in 2016, we spent a bit of time on practical praying – praying with objects – making a bracelet of different beads, in which each bead could represent a person or thing held for a moment before God… or making a bowl and filling it with pieces of paper with names or situations on… which is not so very different from the table over by the Memorial Chapel with the prayer requests. We pray with those pieces of paper at Morning or Evening Prayer, holding the anonymous thoughts and prayers of both friend and stranger up to God. The detail is not for us to know, but God does. Use Post-it notes, or the kitchen noticeboard, or wherever is always in your eyeline, to pray for yourself, for someone you know and for a situation in the wider world that has caught your attention. Hold those specific things before God and be conscious for a moment that God is with those people and in those situations.

And I have said nothing this week about bread – for which you may be extremely grateful, after four weeks when I have talked of little else – but just as a sort of footnote: this Jesus, this bread of life, whose flesh we eat Sunday by Sunday, knows those who would reject him and those who would betray him. And asked the twelve: so do you want to leave me too? And Simon Peter said: Why would we? What else is there? We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.’

We have a God who gives us the wherewithal to stand firm in our faith, and we rejoice in his gift of prayer to us, praying that we might not put it aside in a dark cupboard but use it in thankfulness for our good and the good of all his world.

**Amen**