

**Twelfth Sunday after Trinity 2021 (22.08.2021)**

**Ephesians 6: 10 – 20; John 6: 56 – 69**

A reading such as our first lesson today, from Ephesians 6, all about putting on the armour of God does not sit comfortably with contemporary sensibilities. There is, of course, an unanswerable case in favour of pacifism. Very few people are pacifists, although of course some are. But even though most of us are not pacifists, that isn't because we've found an argument with which to answer the case for pacifism: it's because we've chosen not to answer it, and have persuaded ourselves that principle must be overridden by pragmatism: we persuade ourselves that because the world is not an ideal place, we must live within the constraints of reality as we find it.

But even those of us who manage to square that with our consciences – and I count myself firmly in that number: as the father of a soldier and a British Legion padre I can hardly pretend to be opposed to

maintaining a standing army – but even those of us who are not pacifists are today uncomfortable with militaristic imagery. Onward Christian Soldiers is a bit of an embarrassment, and Ephesians 6 isn't far behind. We prefer to talk up peace.

Of course peace doesn't ensure peace – see what I did there? There are two different types of peace; and having the first type doesn't automatically mean you get the second type. The first meaning of peace is an end to hostilities. There was peace on the battle fields of France after 11 o'clock on the 11<sup>th</sup> November 1918 when the gunfire stopped and stillness and silence descended over the devastated landscape. But the landscape was still devastated and the other sort of peace building had yet to begin.

If we didn't always know that ending war and building peace isn't the same thing, our experience in Iraq over the last 20 years should have taught us. Toppling Saddam Hussein was surprisingly simple, but – quite

apart from all the controversy about the sexed up dossier to justify starting the war in the first place – the complete failure to plan for building a peace after conflict has led to prolonged human tragedy which overshadows any supposed justification for mounting the action in the first place. And then, of course, there are the scenes we've seen this week of the hasty and botched withdrawal from military engagement in Afghanistan. It's difficult to know what words to offer in response to what we've seen other than to affirm that our hearts are full of anguish and our prayers are cries of anguish.

So there's no pretending that peace is an easy option. It takes hard work. It takes more than a stereotypical hippy saying "hey, peace man." It requires strategic planning, commitment and hard work. In fact anybody would accept it requires many of the qualities listed in Ephesians 6: truth, righteousness, a readiness to speak up and faith, whether or not you like them described as a belt, breastplate, shoes and

shield. And for anyone trying to build peace as an expression of their Christian faith, it requires salvation, the Holy Spirit and the word of God.

In our Gospel reading Peter affirms that Jesus has the words of eternal life. There is also, of course, an explicit acknowledgement that following those words is not easy. It's suggested that in his earthly life people just couldn't hack it and fell away. We like to think of Jesus as a magnetic figure in whom everyone found solace and comfort and affirmation and you couldn't not like him because he's "the man for all the people." But this Gospel reading serves as a corrective to that. There is a challenge with Jesus, an edginess, even a harshness. Just as seeking peace is more than floating round saying "hey, peace man" being a follower of Jesus is more than floating around singing Kumbaya.

And if we're seeking peace because we're followers of Jesus, the hard work must involve facing the edginess of the challenge of Jesus as we apply strategic

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

planning, commitment and hard work. Jesus is God embracing humanity. So to be like Jesus as we strive for peace, we must embrace humanity. That must mean embracing all of humanity, respecting and promoting everyone's human rights, whether they be male or female and whatever their faith tradition or ethnicity.

And here we come up against Vladimir Putin's searingly patronising efforts to capitalise out of the Afghanistan disaster at his farewell summit with Angela Merkel. He said it was counterproductive to try to "build democracy in other countries according to foreign templates"<sup>1</sup>. This touches a raw nerve in the history of Christian missionary endeavour. There is much to be proud of in the missionary movement, but it is undoubtedly the case that in the final quarter of the nineteenth century missionary zeal was distorted by nationalism and became complicit with colonialism.

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<sup>1</sup> See the [Guardian](#) Vladimir Putin warns west to stop meddling in Afghanistan, 20.08.2021

Spreading the Gospel was less about introducing people to the glorious liberty of the children of God, and more about turning people into compliant pseudo-Englishmen who dutifully go to Matins and Evensong every Sunday. So when President Putin criticises U.S. and UK foreign policy for "trying to impose Western values and democracy on other countries"<sup>2</sup> I get a twinge of conscience.

So the question we're left with is whether educating girls and allowing women into the professions and government posts, declining to stone people who have committed adultery, and promoting a diversity of political thought and religious belief is just Western values that it's culturally insensitive to impose on Afghanistan, or whether they represent something that's intrinsic to the Christian faith. I would like to hope that liberty is not exclusively for bearded men. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> See the [Washington Post](#) Putin chides U.S. on its actions in Afghanistan — and warns of the risk of terrorism 20.08.2021

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