

Walking the Talk

What a great passage from Saint Paul! Talk about walking the talk! How to dress; what to do; where to go; and not to be afraid to get there!

Let's recap what he has told us to do in Ephesians 6

Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

Take up that which will protect you. The armour of God: the shield of faith: the breastplate of life. Protect your heart and mind in everything and know that if it is God centred and focussed, then this is the most important thing we need.

6:12 For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

I guess there were times when we would have had to wonder here in Australia in the last week about present darkness, rulers and authorities. It was very easy to find yourself in a dark place when those who have answered

the call to serve the nation in leadership squabbled, for the 7th year in a row, over just who should be running the joint.

This is at odds with the opening prayer of Parliament each day.

Almighty God, we humbly beseech Thee to vouchsafe Thy special blessing upon this Parliament, and that Thou wouldst be pleased to direct and prosper the work of Thy servants to the advancement of Thy glory, and to the true welfare of the people of Australia.

I'm not sure about you, but I didn't see much advancement of God's glory, and very little was there until after the coup about the welfare of your people Australia!

Interestingly, on Friday, I learned that our local Shire Council used to open with the prayer at the start of their meetings, substituting *Shire* and *Macedon Ranges* for *Parliament* and *Australia*. I say used to, as of Wednesday, they voted not to open the proceedings with prayer.

A local reporter rang me to try and create a bit of controversy: local Vicar condemns the Council, but I think

he was somewhat disappointed in my response. The argument given is that as 50% of the Shire identify themselves as Christian, and we do not have a state religion, should the council continue a tradition that does not reflect the beliefs of the community?

Two things came to mind there: firstly, logically, I can only agree with the argument.

Secondly, it is an indictment on all the Christian communities that it's below 50%. We all know what a mark below 50% means in school! Lest we forget! It's time for us to have the parents in for a good chat!

Interestingly, the Council has opted for an affirmation that states that they will prosper, advance and look out for the welfare of the people of the Shire of the Macedon Ranges. I told the reporter that I thought that was amazing: most other councils have just done away with any sense of serving the people. Let's hold them to it, and then again, look at our own role.

How this gets reported is anyone's guess!

Saint Paul continues:

6:13 Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.

6:14 Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness.

Maybe I should have stayed firm on insisting on prayer, but really, the temporal matters of the community is a gift that God has given us. We are all spiritual stewards of creation, and taking our part in the community, whether as a minority or majority, respect of our position matters.

No council would be fooled, I personally pray, into acting against the needs and welfare of those who are vulnerable. I also pray that they would not fall into the temptation of thinking that sheer numbers immediately mean that they are holders of the truth.

At the Nuremberg rallies, up to 700,000 attended the 1934 event. Does 700,000 people mean that they were in the right by sheer numbers? I belong to a football club with 54,000 members...does that mean the 101,000 Richmond supporters are more right than me? Of course not...

so...

6:15 As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.

6:16 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.

6:17 Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

It is from within that our transformation occurs, protected and enhanced by the presence of the Spirit of God. The militaristic language may be a bit much, but let's look at it from a practical point of view.

Paul wrote when pointing out our foes, that the enemies are not of *blood and flesh*. In the Gospel, we hear Jesus teaching us:

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.

6:57 Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.

6:58 This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever."

I noted to one of our Wardens that this year, I'm struggling to really get excited by the Eucharistic nature of John

chapter 6. I think the good folk in the synagogue have it right when they say:

"This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?"

6:61 But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you?"

6:62 Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?"

6:63 It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.

6:64 But among you there are some who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him.

6:65 And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father."

6:66 Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.

For those who are into numbers: "Because of this many disciples turned back and no longer went about with him" is 6.66!

It is difficult at times to explain to the world the spiritual in the realm of the temporal. In the temporal, the world about us, we are called to transform peoples lives by that

which is unseen, and can only be received in faith. Many wanted concrete examples of the presence of God. The taunt "see the Son of Man ascend" is also significant in John's gospel: there is no ascension of Jesus in this account.

The blessing of the Temple was a marvellous thing, and the beautiful language of the Psalm of Zion, 84, is truly marvellous. It points to the physical things around you but draws you into something deeper: an understanding that the presence of God is not limited by the building, but reflected in all that is.

US theologian and Scholar Walter Brueggemann said of the psalm it is to *"serve to celebrate, legitimate, and enhance Zion-Jerusalem as the epicenter of reality wherein YHWH dwells permanently in a way that guarantees the city," thereby making the people feel safe--after all, God is in their city. Could there be a better source of security?*

However, Brueggemann seems to see a tension between the Temple as a place for "the practice of alternative imagination" and its role as "part of the urban-political-economic establishment." I think he's talking about a place where we can imagine how things should and could

be, rather than how they actually are. A place where we can dream the dream of God.

Brueggemann compares the latter role to that of the National Cathedral in Washington, which provides a religious backdrop that can enhance the power and prestige, for example, of political leaders as they address the nation (Mandate to Difference: An Invitation to the Contemporary Church).

Is our church a place that offers "alternative imagination"?
(Kathryn Matthews, Sermon Seeds Year B)

Is there a place in our community for a State Religion?

I don't think so. I reflected back on my journalistic encounter seeking to stir up something for the local paper. I'm comfortable in saying this: We have no state religion, therefore no reason to insist or decry the presence or absence in prayer at the start of the Council meetings. That we are less than 50% in the Shire as Christians, that is more a question of faith that requires more of our attention and prayers.

I like the suggestion of the Church being a place of *alternative imagination* as much as I like the call of the Church to be an *agency of transformation*. My report to the

Parish Council on Tuesday night was based on that very premise. Yes, we must address matters temporal. financial and legal, but at the end of the day ask ourselves in reflection, *what are we doing to transform lives in our community?*

I wrote to the Parish Council saying:

...there is a need to address some conformational matters, but to do so at the expense of transformation of our world that moves beyond simply 'knowing Christ' to dynamically 'living in Christ' through our love and worship is the beginning of a new pilgrimage beyond the concept of being our religion to becoming our way of life.

An alternate imagination. A charism that transforms people of God in terms of faith and life. This is a call to *think different*, and use that thought for a greater good, armed only with the helmet of faith and the sword of salvation. What a novel idea!

Perhaps we could adopt a new parish prayer based on the collect for the Opening of Parliament and Council, and actually dare to listen to our Lord, and even Saint Paul, and begin to *walk the talk*.

Almighty God, we humbly beseech Thee to vouchsafe Thy special blessing upon this Church, and that Thou wouldst be pleased to direct and prosper the work of Thy servants to the advancement of Thy glory, and to the true welfare of all your people.

84:11 For the LORD God is a sun and shield; he bestows favour and honour. No good thing does the LORD withhold from those who walk uprightly.

84:12 O LORD of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you.

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With the current emphasis on changing the culture of the "church" and making it more conformational, there is, deep within our Anglo-Catholic tradition, something that is more than ecclesiastical obedience tempered through our inherited and much-loved liturgical practice. It is an underlying principle of social justice inspired and borne out of the need to witness to the transformational presence of Christ in community.

I noted with interest that our Archbishop recently at the *Oodthenong* Muster quoted Fr Tucker in terms of his biblical revelation and call to the Church to return to the greatest sermon ever given: the one on the mount (Matthew) or if you prefer, the plain (Luke).

Mark's gospel begins with the most transformational of all statements: The beginning of the good news..." To share this good news and build upon our traditional roots of justice, righteousness and good news to all in community is deeply embedded in the Oxford movement.

Richard Rohr speaks of the Church being the agency of transformation.

The term 'renewal' is often bandied about as the panacea for church growth and strength, but attention to that which matters: deeper relationship with our risen, ascended and glorified Lord that brings transformation of individuals and community is surely where we should begin.

For sure, there is a need to address some conformational matters, but to do so at the expense of transformation of our world that moves beyond simply 'knowing Christ' to dynamically 'living in Christ' through our love and worship is the beginning of a new pilgrimage beyond the concept of being our religion to becoming our way of life.

Presently, I'm looking at the Lenten period next year to explore that great sermon in terms of the "Transforming of us as the people of God."

The aim is to look at the challenges of the sermon, and the gifts of the people of God as a means of living dynamically in our community.

Any transformation must come from within. If it means attentive revision of the liturgy and our lectionary-based pattern, so be it. If it requires looking at our community and realising that Sunday mornings are about children and sport, and we engage differently, so be it. If it means, (God forbid!) that I need to change, well, err, umm...so mote it be?

Transformation, if it does not come from deep within our community of faith and tradition out of conviction, and not because of duty or compliance, then we will be like the flowers of the field.

What I long to see is a transformational church built on the beauty of our legacy that will truly bring change to a broken and divided world, and be worthy of a fragrant offering of prayer and thanksgiving to the One who gives us life.

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