

Jesus' power

Readings: Eph 6:10 – 18, Mark 3:20 - 27

The Graham family, another family and 2 single people are Christian missionaries who lived and ministered, in a predominately Islamic area of the slums of Manila around 20 years ago. It was the month of Ramadan.

What do you know about Ramadan?

According to the Quran, Muhammad first received revelations in the lunar month of Ramadan. Therefore, the month of Ramadan is considered to be the most sacred month of the Islamic calendar. Muslims fast during the days of this month long religious festival. (They are allowed to eat before dawn and after dark.) They also pray more regularly, read portions of the Quran and endeavour to be more charitable than usual. The rewards for fasting anytime are good but the rewards for fasting in Ramadan are meant to be doubled.

As the days progressed, the Christians felt the spiritual climate became more and more oppressive. It got to the stage where they needed to do something about it. So they got together to pray. "Lord, show us what to do" they pleaded. After some considerable time in prayer, someone said "Let's have a party." They all agreed that is what the Lord was directing them to do, so they gathered together again in a day or two and had a party in the middle of the day. They drank Coke and ate chips and other party food.

As they celebrated, the Christians felt spiritual oppression lift. They had acted in the opposite spirit to the one demanding fasting and privation all around them. They had sought the Lord as to how they should fight the spiritual battle; asked what weapons they should use. God said "party". As they partied, the Christians were engaged in spiritual warfare just as much as the day they prayed.

Now that is well and good for them. But what does it have to do with us. We live in a Christian culture right? We don't have to worry about evil or spiritual attack do we?

Notice from our Gospel passage when Jesus was attacked. He had just chosen the 12; the ones he would live with and train up to work with him in ministry. Jesus had been working miracles. People were being healed and set free from evil. All seemed to be well. They were very busy doing God the Father's work in his world.

That sounds a bit like us doesn't it? God is moving in and through us in the community in which we live. Perhaps we need to guard against spiritual attack too.

Actually I don't think there is a 'perhaps' about it. Last week I put a word from the Lord in the newsletter. Marie Tilley and John Palmer were praying on the Monday when Marie felt God say something specific so she wisely wrote it down. When Marie passed it on to me I had forgotten about this morning's topic and scripture readings. God hadn't.

They tie in perfectly. Please get a copy of the newsletter if you didn't see it. There is no doubt in my mind that this word is for us here and now. There is much to digest in what Marie has written down. Today though, the first thoughts are upper most in my mind. This is what God said:

Pray for Gods protection from the enemy.

He gave us the tools.

The Armour and His Word.

Use them

The Lord is doing amazing things in and through us and this is way cool. So it was for Jesus. And then he got attacked. Of course it didn't throw Jesus and it doesn't need to throw us either.

Has anyone ever called you crazy? Jesus understands how you feel. Jesus was completely misunderstood. Even his family didn't get him. Yet, he didn't let the narrow-mindedness or short-sightedness of others limit him. He was on a mission

from God and he'd use everything God had given him to fulfil it. When people attacked Jesus, he saw that for what it was – part of the spiritual battle he was in. Jesus understood what Paul would expand on later:

For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places. Eph 6:12

We are all in a spiritual battle. Another example occurs in Acts 5, Jesus' followers are attacked by the religious lot. But one wise religious guy didn't want to oppose what God was doing. Remember the situation where Peter and his mates refuse to keep quiet about Jesus when the high council tell them to shut up? They were ministering in Jesus' power – people were being healed and set free from evil oppression. The religious lot were jealous, cos they weren't working the miracles or seeing people flock to them and so they arrested Peter and his mates.

They want them killed. But Gamaliel, the wise guy, advises them "... leave these men alone. Let them go. If they are planning and doing these things merely on their own, it will soon be overthrown. But if it is from God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You may even find yourselves fighting against God!"

It's good advice. When in doubt about whether or not something is from God, wait and see. Gamaliel could almost have been Anglican! The others agreed and let Peter and his mates go – after a good beating just to show them who was in charge.

The Gospel of Mark is all about King Jesus and his Kingdom. Jesus overcame the spiritual powers in a variety of ways. Sometimes he faced them head on casting out Spirits or confronting people directly. "Get behind me Satan" he said, to one of his best mates, when he didn't want to co-operate with God's plan. "You are not thinking about the things of God. Instead, you are thinking about human things." Mk 8:33, at 16:23

At other times Jesus simply went about his Father's business, refusing to be distracted. He did what his Father said and kept to the mission in front of him. He did this often knowing it would go against popular opinion. An example of this includes healing on the Sabbath. Owen talked with us about that last week.

Sometimes Jesus took the opportunity for a teaching moment. This is what happened in our reading today.

The religious lot, showed their ignorance or worse, evil intentions by operating in something opposed to the Holy Spirit. They said the Holy One of God was possessed by the evil one. That is dangerous territory.

Jesus was working hard out for his Dad when the religious lot accused him of working for the other side; of using evil powers for his own agenda. Jesus basically tells them how wrong they are. I can hardly use evil to cast out evil can I? The enemy is not going to allow that to happen. It would result in its ultimate downfall. Do you think that is what the enemy wants? No.

Now notice that Jesus doesn't deny the reality of evil. Some do today. Or at least they don't know how to account for it because they don't acknowledge the spiritual realm. Others blame evil on God e.g. after the Christchurch and Japanese earthquakes some very unhelpful Christians talked about God's judgement.

Jesus acknowledges that evil does exist and he points out the obvious; you need to be powerful to overcome evil. Jesus is a pretty humble guy but he is making a strong statement here. We can't use dodgy methods to overcome evil. The only way to overcome evil do it is to use the strength that he brings. Jesus is really saying. "Evil is real and it's powerful. But don't freak out people because I am stronger."

And he leaves it hanging without hammering it home. He often does that. Leaves people to think.

At the end of his life, our Lord bowed His head on the cross and said, "It is finished." He was referring to God's plan to defeat all that is evil and to bring the whole of creation to reconciliation in him. At that point, in the midst of Jesus' apparent weakness and failure, the spiritual powers were defeated by his power. Those powers of evil no longer have sway over Christians. They just pretend they can and sometimes, foolishly, we believe them.

Later on the apostle Paul expands on the power there is in Christ. He does the theology for us. In his letter to the Ephesian church Paul spells out how the spiritual is part of our every-day life. After telling us how to live in families, at work and in the world he lists some useful weapons for battle.

When the church received Paul's letter, they understand all about the armour and weapons that the Roman soldiers wielded. They saw the soldiers on patrol, or guarding places just like guards protect Buckingham Palace and 10 Downing St today.

We are not so familiar with such armour so I have pinched Karl Summerfield's interpretation for today. The Summerfield family watches a lot of formula one and other car racing. They've been to races and been amazed how fast the cars go.

Racing is dangerous business. The drivers guard against that danger. They'd never consider just wandering out in their underpants and getting in the car. They wear special clothes and have special gear to race:

Belt of truth – seatbelts – holds them in place, like truth does.

Breastplate of righteousness - flame proof overalls

Feet fitted with readiness comes from gospel of truth – special driving shoes, keep them quick on the throttle and the brake

Shield of faith – driver cell

Helmet of salvation – helmet– been saved, keeps your head safe

Sword of the spirit – word of God – certainly attack – maybe the engine in the car. ¹

¹ Karl and Fiona Summerfield's notes

We are to resist the devil. If we resist him, Scripture says, he will flee from us. When Jesus was tempted, he overcame the devil, not by argument but simply by quoting Scripture. Mark 1

A couple of years ago, I was going through a hard time. I can't remember the details but I do remember feeling under attack. My dear warden Marie said "You need to put on the armour of God". And so I did for several months. During that time Kevin and I did a trip to the UK. I sent Marie this pic.

Now I don't understand how all this works but the attacks stopped. After a while I didn't put the armour on every day; just when I remembered. The armour of God is one way of waging spiritual warfare and an important method of self-protection; rather of using the protection that the power of Jesus gives us.

Paul winds up his passage by reminding us to pray – in the Spirit – at all times. The Lord is leading us to pray more. At our vestry retreat on Saturday he told us he wasn't hearing enough from us. We need to rectify that.

Now, you have been given a card with one of the weapons or items of armour. I invite you to take a moment and have a wee discussion with God about what he wants to say to you about it. If the one you have doesn't seem relevant then do swap with a neighbour.



² Pics of the cards circulated for reflection.

In invite you to spend a few moments with your Lord right now. As if he wants you to use this particular weapon in some way. Specifically ask him how to use it and who can support you in this.

It may be so be that he has something to say to us as a church about how we use his power or something else.

I will give you an opportunity to share that in a moment.

So what did the Lord say to you? If anyone would like to share briefly what you feel the Lord has said, please do that briefly now.

We've seen that we are in a battle. Attack sometimes comes when all is going well and so we need to be on our guard. There are several ways for us to stand in the power that Jesus has given us. Using the armour God has given us will look different as we find ourselves in different situations.

Sometimes we will confront evil. Sometimes we will simply act in the opposite spirit and carry on with the plan our Lord has before us. There is no one size fits all. The key is that whenever anything evil or negative is happening, we ask the Spirit "What would you have me/us do?" The Lord will always answer us. As a body, we walk in the power of Jesus together. Remember Gamaliel's words: If we are following God's plan, working with him in his mission, no-one and nothing will be able to stop what we are doing.

If you'd like to talk with anyone about this or have someone pray for you, please ask me or one of the prayers up the front.