

EPHESIANS 6:10-24
STANDING FIRM

The 'Battle for hearts and minds' – that's a phrase that has been used so often in recent years as the West has been faced with the increased threat of terrorism. We have engaged in a battle for hearts and minds in Iraq and then in Afghanistan and Pakistan in order to persuade people in these places to think better, to cast aside a way of thinking that is centred on terrorism and to take on board, instead, a peaceful way of thinking. This is not always straightforward: it has been seen in Iraq as the West taking over, that their own way of thinking was being replaced not by peace, but by Western culture, and what for Western leaders has been a battle against terrorism, for most ordinary Iraqis and Afghans has been a battle to preserve their culture. I'm not going to debate the rights and wrongs of that political issue, but simply to use notion of 'the battle for hearts and minds' as the way into Ephesians 6.

There is a battle for hearts and minds that has been going on for far longer than the war in Afghanistan. In some ways, the whole Bible is the story of this battle. On the one hand, God has a great plan to bless the world, to create a people who will love Him faithfully and will live life in His ways and the centre of that plan is the coming of Jesus and his life, death and resurrection. On the other hand, call it what you like, the devil, powers of darkness, is at work in the world to spoil that work of God by persuading us to live life in a very different way and above all, persuading us that it doesn't really matter how we live. This battle is there at the very beginning of the bible's story in the garden of Eden; it is there in the time of Jesus; it will be there till the very end of time itself; the battle for our hearts and minds is this - who will we love? Who will we worship? Who will we follow?

The very last words of Ephesians tell us what Paul wants of us – to *"love our..."* (6:24) That is what Paul wants from us, to love Jesus endlessly, faithfully, till the end. That is where our heart should lie, loving Jesus, seeing how good and great Jesus is, worshipping Him, appreciating Him, following Him and doing all of that with all of our energy for all of our life. That is where the heart and mind of the Christian should lie. But that is far from easy: there are other forces at work in our world – *"Our struggle..."* (6:12) These spiritual forces are out to destroy our love for Jesus, to undo the work that God has done in us, are out to spoil God's good work in world, and so Christians face opposition to our faith to make us give up, or we are distracted from faith by other things that seem all right at the time, but afterwards we see how they spoiled our love for Jesus and we have drifted away. This is the battle for our hearts and minds that has been going on for generations and is still going on in us in 2009.

"Therefore..." (6:13) Paul perhaps spent many hours each day chained to a Roman soldier and saw the armour as a fine picture of the resources God has given us to help us stand firm in the faith. The armour; can be understood simply as what God has done for us and gifts that God has given to us, though there is some debate about one or two words. Overall, the whole thing is a picture of the ways God has promised to make us strong, to give us courage, strength and energy to stand firm in the battle for our heart and mind. The truth of the gospel holds all of this together like a belt; we are justified people, there is no condemnation, we are forgiven – the breastplate covering our hearts; we have peace with God – there is a sure footing for us to stand on; our faith lays hold of the promises and power of God, a shield to knock down insinuating ideas that come from elsewhere; God has saved us and His saving power is at work constantly on our behalf – Paul pictures this as the helmet; the Bible is like a sword to deal with close personal combat, so that we know what is true and what to believe and how to live in God's ways. God has given us all of this so that we may stand firm.

How do we use this armour? We have to know it. This is all about who and what we are: we are people who know and stand on the truth, people who are free and forgiven, people who are at peace with God, people in whom the saving power of God is constantly at work, people who know and live by Bible, people who pray and realise that prayer is arguably the greatest weapon of all in Christian life. This is all about who and what we are in Christ. But other things come along to challenge that: someone sees us do something and challenges us – “how can you call yourself a Christian &...”; or we read a book that contains some dubious ideas and we begin to embrace them because not sure what the bible actually says; or we face up to some tough times in life and these experiences lead us to doubt our faith, to doubt God and we begin to drift away from Him, and we stop coming to Church. These things are allowed to get to us because don't know or forget or don't realise what God has done for us in Christ.

Know, for example, that the saving power of God is at work in you every day. Understand that you are a work in progress, not yet perfect, but God is reshaping you by His power, so that when you make a mistake it is not end of everything, but God forgives and keeps working in you with His saving power. This is the helmet. If you were climbing Everest and were to stumble and fall on your way up mountain, you would not come all way back down the mountain to start again, but pick yourself up where you are and start climbing again from there. Mistakes, faults, weaknesses are part of who we are; they are not the end of our faith and discipleship; the saving power of God is at work in us every day. Know, for example, that God promises to be with us always and everywhere, and promises to be the help and strength of our lives day by day; it is faith that makes these promises come alive for us; God has not ever gone away, nor retracted His promises, though we might forget them or for some reason think they don't apply to us. This is the shield. Knowing these things, appreciating these things, we can stand firm in our faith.

Communion is a service to help us stand firm in Jesus. This service is not about us and what we have achieved, but is about Jesus and what He has achieved for us. He has saved us forever; He has forgiven us our sins; He has made peace between God and us; He has given us the sure and certain hope of heaven. All of this He has given us because He loves us. The bread and wine tell us that Jesus died and rose again to make all of this possible; these gifts are the fruit of power and love of God at work in the world. Seeing the bread and wine, sharing the bread and wine, is to help us win the battle for our hearts and minds, to persuade us to love Jesus with an undying love because He has loved us so much that He gave His life for us.

Loving Jesus with an undying love – it's not a bad description of what being a Christian is all about! Let nothing stop us, nothing distract us, nothing persuade us to give up. God has given us the resources of strength, courage, faith, salvation, all we need to stand firm. Use them wisely and well; love Jesus with undying love; *“put on...”* (v13)