

Sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney 23rd August 2015 by Rev Ross Smith. Lectionary: 1 Kings 8:22-30, 41-43; Psalm 84; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69.

Get Ready for a Fight

The living of a courageous life is a current challenge in many spheres of life. In all kinds of situations the motto, “Be Prepared!” is applicable.

This especially applies in the modern era of social media and the hourly news cycle. It is not only politicians who are ambushed on the doorstep, and expected to be ready with an immediate and satisfactory response.

So too for judges, commissioners, economists, journalists, teachers, doctors and other professionals, and even firemen and real estate agents. Christians and members of various faith groups, and representatives of secular organisations are not exempt from the call to “be prepared!”.

It is important to note that “Be prepared” and similar injunctions are basically defensive rather than aggressive. Unfortunately the church (and nations and some sub-groups) has sometimes used military images to go out and try to subdue others, as in the crusades of the Middle Ages.

This is contrary to the gospel's injunctions to love the neighbour and make peace with the one attacking you. This counter-cultural approach takes real courage.

There are occasions when the church and other groups go out to march for some cause, as in the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. But the marchers are meant to be peaceful and non-violent.

Our passage from Ephesians today was written at a time when the early church was regarded as dangerously counter-culture. It didn't acknowledge Caesar as Lord, it depopulated the heavens, it condemned violence as a method of power and undermined the whole Roman ethos of government by coercion and subjugation.

It was regarded as such a dangerous threat by the powers-that-be that they persecuted the Christians mercilessly and martyred many and sent them into the arena to fight the lions. Yet the author of Ephesians recommended defensive armour rather than weapons of attack to counter this peril.

Today, the way the powers-that-be deal with the counter-cultural church is to either ignore it or else to try to enlist its support in their waging of violence, in the name of patriotism, or a coalition or a treaty between groups with a common economic or political interest.

In talking of principalities and powers, C S Lewis believed that they are now to be found in modern bureaucracy, which he regarded as the embodiment of the devil himself. The concentration camps, the detention centres, the labour camps and many of our prisons are the result of the operations of the bureaucracy.

The bureaucracy is made up of quiet, white-collared softly-spoken people who go about their business in an orderly way, in clean, carpeted offices.

“Hence,” Neil Postman, quotes in *Technology: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* “naturally enough, my symbol for hell is something like the bureaucracy of the police state or the office of a thoroughly nasty business concern.”

Walter Wink, in *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* writes “violence has become the new spirituality for our age without us being aware of its grip on our lives.” “Violence demands from its devotees an absolute obedience to death.”

“The threat of violence, it is believed, is alone able to deter aggression.” Violence or the threat of it, was supposed to “grant us peace.”

“The myth of redemptive violence under-girds our popular culture, civil religion, nationalism and foreign policy and it lies coiled at the heart of the system of domination that has characterised human existence since well before Babylon ruled supreme.”

The church has a long history of being counter-cultural on the issue of violence, and many of its ministers and laity have been pacifists. In the scene of Jesus' arrest Jesus ordered Peter to disarm himself, thereby modelling peaceful resistance.

The gospel for today has in the background a desire on the part of some of Jesus' disciples to have Jesus claim a kingly role, that is one that involves subjugating the opponents of a Messianic kingdom.

Against this Jesus claims he is about providing life-giving Spirit that gives people the words of eternal life. He claims to be the revelation of God in his own person, a person of flesh and blood or as Peter expresses it, “God's Holy One”. A non-violent Messiah.

Some disciples left off their following of Jesus because of his claim to be the life-giving Spirit of God, a non-violent Messiah. There are parallels in our church today where people may leave the church or cancel their pledges because of the contemporary church's attempt to speak the word of God to the political and social realities of today.

In this context we recall that Jesus was critical not only of the secular power of Rome but also of the power structure vested in the Temple in Jerusalem which Solomon had envisaged as God's dwelling place. Instead of God's dwelling place being in the Temple, it is situated in Jesus' own being, as attested by Peter.

Our counter-cultural messiah referred to himself as the way, the truth and the life. The way, the truth and the life are not found in power structures of societies or temples or bureaucracies. Those structures are violent and divisive.

We are invited to decide to place our faith in Jesus as the life-giving revelation of God. The one who is the Prince of Peace. The speaker of truth who models redemptive love and who brings in those spurned by the people in positions of power, who brings in the people regarded as powerless.

Ephesians renders this counter-cultural approach approach as speaking the truth, relying on God's justice, and telling the good news about peace.

Faith in this context is not a set of beliefs but rather a stance of courage in the face of relentless attacks and dangerous circumstances. Courage to disavow violence, to refuse to strike back, to avoid harming or injuring.

Under attack, we are urged to trust God's saving power and stay on the message of the Spirit, which affirms that we are all part of one body and equally important and loved.

This involves us in being attentive to the needs of others rather than our own needs, praying incessantly for others that they may be courageous.

Like the people being ambushed by social media or journalists, we need to remain alert and prepared at all times to clarify and explain our stances and declare the mystery about the good news that is not about getting our own back, but is about love and non-violence.

Courage and bravery are needed to hold our ground in opposing the powers-that-be when it could mean having to endure jail or being under duress. We all need each other's prayers and affirmation to help us keep our nerve when under attack.

The message of affirmation is characteristic of Jesus' ministry and can become part of our own as we “fight the good fight with all our might.”