

Ephesians week 7

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Our journey with St Paul's letter to the Ephesians is helping us think what it means to be more Christ-like. In the first three weeks we thought about three big themes in Paul's teaching

- That we are a Church or Ekklesia – a community of communities of faith
- That our hope and salvation is found in God's love for us, not in how much we try to please God, or do good things
- That God's great riches – his healing and forgiveness – are available to all; no one is beyond God's mercy.

We then looked at how Paul began to apply these to the new church in Ephesus, and how we can learn from them

- That our priority is therefore building and equipping the Church, particularly amongst those new to us and the young
- How being Christ-like leads us away from untruth and anger and towards love
- Whilst last week we thought about how our understanding of who Jesus is in our lives leads us to attend to how we live our relationships, and especially our marriages, basing them on mutual encouragement, and mutual submission to Jesus Christ.

As we conclude this short sermon series, we come to the final verses of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, in Chapter 6. Perhaps they are some of his most famous. "Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil".

Albert Einstein once said "The measure of intelligence is the ability to change." Perhaps one of the greatest traits of the modern world is flexibility. On average it is thought someone under 30 will change career 7 times before they retire. Gone of the days of a job for life. We like to think of ourselves as flexible people, who can fit in with wherever we find ourselves.

But St Paul argues against conformity. He urges the new church in Ephesus to stand firm in their convictions. To stand firm in their Christian faith. And to do that requires being nurtured in our tradition, belonging to a faithful community, and growing deep roots of faith.

Yet we mustn't confuse standing firm as being stubborn. Being stubborn might mean being wedded to one position, or being rooted in our own prejudices, or being closed-minded. Paul is asking us to stand in something that is not transient, but something that is transcendent and renewing. A stubborn person will not listen ideas that differ from their own. A stubborn posture rejects alternatives out of hand and refuses, regardless of the situation, to change one's position. Stubbornness is not informed and does not grow. It is enshrined in a closed-circle of certainty and becomes fearful, boisterous and one-dimensional.

But standing firm is different. Standing firm means that one is willing to debate, listen and consider alternatives in order to reach a beneficial goal, whilst at the same time not sacrificing basic principles. Martin Luther King Jr stood firm on nonviolence. Nelson Mandela stood firm and resolute against apartheid.

People like these have a strong self-belief, a concern for justice and compassion. They are grounded in the convictions of the community they come from, and open to critical evaluation. This is how we stand firm, as St Paul counsels.

And we stand firm, not only in the midst of the many physical pressures and battles that engulf our lives – family life, tensions in community and wider society, threats to our planet, and the threat of war on our continent. But the Christian acknowledges the spiritual battles. We know instinctively the battles of the Kingdom of God - two steps forward, and yet there are unseen forces trying to drag us back at least one step, possibly three. So Paul tells us to know that we stand together as the Ekklesia of God – a community of communities. Confident that God loves us, no matter who we are or what we do. Knowing that the blessings of God are showered on us, if we will only ask for them. Stand firm in these truth Paul tells the church. At to protect ourselves he uses military language that would be obvious to anyone in his society used to seeing Roman

military occupation. Put on armour. Not flashy, holywood-friendly armour – but sober, almost boring, and mostly defensive armour.

Belt of truth

Breastplate of justice

Shoes of the gospel of peace

Shield of faith

Helmet of salvation

Spirit's sword – God's word

All surrounded with prayer

Stand firm with the protection that God offers to us. With this armour the Church of God will be built up. We need not fear – we can face our battles. No matter what is around us, be confident in our faith in Jesus, and the Kingdom will be built.