

From this morning's Epistle, from the Letter of St. Paul the Apostle to the Ephesians:  
*... above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the evil one.* Ephesians 6:16

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Day after day. Week after week. Month after month; even year after year.<sup>1</sup> Paul sits in the city of Rome under arrest; a prisoner bound in his own home.

It is, as we might imagine, a time of deep uncertainty. Will this be the day? Will this be the day that they will come? Will this be the day that he will be led to his execution. Will it be this day or the next or the one after that?

And yet, strangely, for all of this deep uncertainty, this time in Rome is, for him, a time of great opportunity. Paul's arrest years before in Jerusalem, and his later appeal to have his case adjudicated by Caesar himself, has brought him to the very heart of the Empire – to what was the largest city in the world at that time.

Paul's arrest has carried him to the centre of the greatest, most powerful empire that the world had ever seen, encompassing fully a quarter of the world's population.<sup>2</sup>

And here in the centre of it all, Paul is able to reach out to virtually any province, to any city, to any corner of this vast Roman Empire that he chooses to – by messenger or by letter. Which is what he does.

And even though he is under close guard every day, shackled to those who watch him, 24/7, he uses his time well – meeting with the Christians in Rome, speaking to them of the abiding hope that he has in Jesus Christ; and writing letter after letter to those churches that he knows so well.<sup>3</sup>

But the threat of violence is still a daily reality; and house arrest is still house arrest. Paul is chained hour after hour, day after day, week after week, to Roman soldiers who must, at times have felt just as chained to Paul as he was to them.

And we can imagine that some of those relationships would have been quite strained: some guards resentful that they'd been given such a tedious assignment; angry and resentful that they have to spend these days shackled to him.

But we also know that some of those relationships were fruitful: even some members of the Praetorian Guard, those soldiers who protected and served the emperor himself, found hope in Christ through Paul's teaching and life.<sup>4</sup>

But just as some of his Roman captors learnt from Paul, so Paul came to learn something from them; as we can see that so clearly in this week's Epistle.

Paul is writing to the Christians in the city of Ephesus, a city where he had once lived for more than a year and a half; and while living under great uncertainty in Rome, his life at risk every moment, he tries to find some way of comforting the Church in

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 28: 30-31: And he lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unhindered.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress*, Toronto, House of Anansi Press, Inc., 2004, pp. 91, 94.

<sup>3</sup> The letters to the Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians are understood to be his 'captivity epistles'.

<sup>4</sup> *Philippians 1:12-14*: I want you to know, brethren, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ; and most of the brethren have been made confident in the Lord because of my imprisonment, and are much more bold to speak the word of God without fear.

Ephesus; some way of helping them to know the grace which God was giving them in the face of their own uncertainties; in the face of their own fears.

And sitting and thinking and talking and praying all that time under house arrest, Paul seizes on those images which are closest at hand: the images of a soldier of the most powerful military force in the world; images that his friends in Ephesus would have understood immediately.<sup>5</sup>

And in those everyday images Paul tells them of the grace which God is offering them in the great tenuous, nervous, battle of life.

He speaks of the spiritual armour which God offers them that they might withstand all those things that threatened them; armour readily at hand for all of their spiritual battles.

Living day by day with those who were guarding him so closely must have shaped Paul's understanding of the kind of spiritual armour with which God equips His people for their safety and their welfare; spiritual armour such as: The belt of truth. And the breastplate of righteousness. And the helmet of salvation. And the sword of the Spirit. And, above all, Paul tells us, [above all] the shield of faith.

But we all know; [we all know] deep within our hearts that there is no shield, Roman or otherwise, that will ever be large enough or strong enough to protect us from all of the uncertainty that life can throw at us. Would that life could be so simple.

Moment by moment, every day of our lives, we face the possibility of having our lives turned upside down in the blink of an eye: a diagnosis from our doctor; a call to the office by our boss; a phone call in the middle of the night.

At times it seems that the only certainty in life is that there are no certainties.

In this week's Gospel, a weary, fearful, worried, maybe even desperate, father does a remarkable thing.

He takes on faith the word that Jesus tells him.

He assumes in advance that his son, his much-loved son, who is at the point of death, is going to be okay; that he is going to recover, just because Jesus said it would be so.

Having travelled from Capernaum to Cana to plead with Christ; having turned to his last desperate hope, he then immediately goes home again solely on the word which Christ speaks; solely on the promise that Christ makes to him.

That's the kind of faith that is our only shield in this very uncertain world:

- a faith that trusts Christ's promise to be with us always;
- a faith which allows us to see past the immediate struggles and trials that we all face, knowing that God is with us no matter what comes;
- a faith that equips us to face any fear, to face and threat, because we know as surely as we know anything else that Christ fights all of these battles with us and for us.

Knowing that, no matter what comes, we are never alone.

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<sup>5</sup> "There seem to be two primary sources of the imagery: the description of Yahweh as a warrior in Isaiah 59:17 and elsewhere, which refers to armor God is not merely the maker of but also the wearer of when he is attacked by his foes, and the armor worn by Roman soldiers, all the more so since Paul is under house arrest and could likely examine such armor on a regular basis (cf. Polybius 6:23; Judith 14:3)." Ben Witherinton III, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians: a socio-rhetorical commentary on the captivity epistles*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007, p. 349.