

“Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.”
(Ephesians 6.11)

What does it mean to have faith? What might it look like? And how can we do it?

All three of our lessons for today have *something* to do with describing how faith looks for us. The most obvious is, perhaps, our Gospel from John 4. The Roman official comes to Jesus to ask him to heal his son. Jesus obliges, and the man returns on his way home to find out that his son had, indeed, been healed at the exact time Jesus told him “Your son lives” the day before. The man went away, trusting that Jesus had done what he said, and his servants confirmed it to him. This man came to Jesus believing that he could heal his son – he came to Jesus, having heard that Jesus was capable of such a feat. He came to Jesus with *faith* that he had the power that was rumoured and could heal his son. ¶ Jesus, in this discourse, hints that he didn’t want to go with the man to see the boy for himself because the people following him needed to realize that faith was more than what they could see – more than a visible miracle. When the official turned and went on his way home, he had to have faith that Jesus did what he said, and those other people in the crowd who heard the command, if they had faith in Jesus, would have believed that the boy was in fact healed. It was a test of faith on the part of all those present for this interaction.

In another instance of faith, Jacob wrestled with God through the night. Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham, had fled from his older brother Esau for twenty years after he tricked his brother into selling him his birthright for a bowl of soup. Esau is portrayed as having abandoned the covenantal relationship of his fathers in this moment, and the blessing, the watchfulness of God fell upon his younger brother Jacob to be the father of God’s people. After leaving his father-in-law’s house, and fleeing with his whole family, his animals, his wives, and his children to escape Esau who was pursuing him, Jacob encounters a man on the road who just seems to grab him and begin to wrestle. It’s rather abrupt in the flow of the story. We have a long description of him fleeing Esau, then he abruptly encounters this man on the road, a few verses later gets a new name, and then flees Esau some more, before finally meeting with him peacefully. It might be a fleeting moment in the wider story, but it is one of great importance. ¶ Its importance is that, here, Jacob has an encounter with God. Whether an angel of God or God himself seems to be of little importance. This man was God in one way or another. He touched Jacob’s hip socket, and with a touch only, put his leg out of joint. Jacob, the man who had been struggling with people since his youth, was now struggling with God. And when asked to let him go, Jacob said, “not unless you bless me.” Did Jacob realize he was struggling with God? Did Jacob realize what he was doing? Hard to say, but God did, in fact bless him. God gave him a new name, “Israel, because you have striven with God, and with men, and have prevailed.” When Jacob asks the man his name, the man replies “why do you ask my name?”. It would seem that Jacob realized who he was wrestling with after the fact, for he names the place Peniel, saying, “for I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered”. Jacob, whether or not he realized it, was changed by God and saw the need for a blessing and not a struggle, and God changed him and gave him a new name. Jacob’s faith in the God of his fathers, his encounter with God, changed him.

So far, we have seen in the Gospel and the Old Testament lessons examples of how faith can result in change. How God can inspire faith in unseen acts, but also through encounters. Having faith is one thing, but our Epistle for today also sets out how that faith can protect us and how we must take on God’s protection. ¶ The Ephesians are encouraged to “be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might”, and are urged to “put on the whole armour of God”. Paul writes to the Ephesians that the Christian battle is less against flesh and blood but more against the spiritual forces of evil, which will remain through the present age – that is, until the second coming of Christ at the last day of judgement. This present age – this time between Christ’s ascension and his coming again – is what Paul calls the “evil day”. By adorning yourself with the armour of God, Paul says, you stand a chance in this battlefield of spiritual warfare. What are the pieces of the armour that allow us to stand fast in the faith of Christ? They are: the belt of truth; the breastplate of righteousness; the readiness given by the gospel of peace is worn like shoes; the shield of faith; the helmet of salvation; and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. And while wearing these, the Ephesians are urged to pray at all times in the Spirit, with

all supplication and perseverance.

This imagery is necessarily militaristic because Spiritual warfare is truly a war of the soul. It is a war constantly being waged on us who believe in God, to try to corrupt us and turn us away from God. It is like, in C.S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*, having our personal tempters trying to convince us to anything other than trust God. But, the forces that wage their war against the Christian are often far less obvious. They are planting the seeds of doubt. They are making us believe that we are right when we rationalize some part of our faith. They are making us behave in ways that do not convey the love of God. But we must armour ourselves against these forces. We tie up our pants with the belt of truth, for we know that God is the maker of heaven and earth, the almighty and powerful God, and that Jesus is his son. We can put on the breastplate of righteousness only because Jesus makes us righteous through his sacrifice. We can put the shoes on our feet because the good news of the Gospel of peace allows us to walk on the sharp and jagged edges of a rough world with confidence. We hold the shield of faith, that protects us from the fiery darts of the enemy, because faith allows us to resist the attacks of doubt that can burn us down. We adorn the helmet of Salvation, because in Christ we have been saved and no matter what affliction we face, our soul will be with him. And our weapon is the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. The Holy Spirit enables and emboldens us to march onwards through the danger because we read about God's promises and what he has revealed to us through Christ our Lord. ¶ We adorn ourselves with the armour of God metaphorically only. We are not being sent out to fight a Holy War of a physical sense, but a spiritual one. For Jesus tells us that his kingdom is not of this world. He did not come to earth leading armies to defeat the Romans and take the Holy Land, instead he came as a babe in a stable because his true mission was the saving of souls for God's heavenly kingdom. While St. Paul tells the Ephesians this armour is to protect them through this present age, which still applies to us today, we have received a glimpse of the age to come in St. John's Revelation. We read that St. Michael and his angels ultimately defeat the forces of evil, and John is presented with a vision of a new heaven and a new earth – a new Jerusalem – where all people are made to be in right relationship with God. With this vision lying ahead of us, we know that this is the end result, and it is our duty to God to do our best to make it there.

But St. Paul tells the Ephesians what the most powerful weapon in their arsenal is: that is prayer. In conjunction with the rest of this armour, prayer is key. Prayer opens up that channel between us and God so that we might speak to him and hear him speak to us. Prayer for ourselves and for those we love solidifies the relationship we have with God, which tightens up our defences against the enemy. Because the more we pray, the more we encounter God, the more real he is. Our faith is solidified by our relationship and understanding of God.

We should not seek miracles or changes for us to develop faith. For Jesus in the Gospels only performs healings or miracles for those who already have faith in him, not so that the receiver can develop faith. He rewards faith, he deepens faith – he does not forge it through these acts. As Jacob requested a blessing, he was changed. As the Roman official begged for a healing, his son was healed.

John Henry Newman wrote in a sermon: "Let us not then seek for signs and wonders; for clear, or strong, or compact, or original arguments; but let us believe; evidence will come after faith as its reward, better than before it as its groundwork." If we go out looking for evidence, for signs and wonders, on which to base our faith, we will always stumble. But with true faith we will be rewarded with all the evidence we need – for we will see God at work. Faith is our shield, St. Paul says, it is what guards us from the fiery darts of the enemy. We need to have the shield up, or else we risk being attacked.

So what does it mean to have faith? It means to trust God. It means that we are protected. It ultimately changes our whole beings if we accept it, and it means that we believe even if we cannot see God at work. It means that God will give us the armour to protect ourselves in the face of spiritual warfare. It means that Jesus has destroyed the enemies of sin and death. It means that we trust that God will prevail at the end of the age and we will be changed from glory to glory.

So pray to God. Lean on God. Believe in God, and ask to be blessed by Him through whom all things were made. "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might... praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication." (Eph. 6.10, 18).

"Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible" (Eph. 6.24) Amen.