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Sunday 32B/All Saints [off RCL]

Sermon notes on Ephesians 6.10-24

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I suspect that Paul's talk of spiritual principalities and the powers strikes most today as language from a different world and time. As such it is, for many, embarrassing language, best treated as the historical residue of an earlier time – dross which we can discard once we've discovered the "true heart" of Christian belief. I've no intention of trying to salvage this dross the morning, or at least to salvage what might seem to be its "literal" meaning. But the problem is that, if we deal lightly with what Paul says here by simply rejecting what we might call his spiritual cosmology, the chances are we're revealing that some things about we believe about *God* won't hold water.

What embarrassment we might feel about Paul's language is in strange tension with what *doesn't* embarrass us – the belief in *God* himself. For there is a sense in which *God* is a kind of principality or power – albeit a much bigger one, and a good one – but this is not a thought which we find so unbelievable as Paul's talk of authorities and cosmic powers. We find ourselves, then, in the strange situation that we can believe in what we might call a "spiritual" goodie, but not spiritual *baddies*. Perhaps we can illustrate this most clearly with reference to the commonly held belief in the churches that while *God* definitely "is", there is *not* a devil – a personal force for evil. There is, then, quite possibly implicit in our thinking only good in the "spiritual" realm, and not bad. That is, for most of us who believe, there is a quiet confidence in the thought that *God* is Spirit – *God* here being something or someone good – and at the same time a sense that there is no such thing as an "evil spirit". Whatever Paul refers to in the first couple of verses of today's reading, it is not something we now consider to be "real". The only spirit which matters is that which is "*God*".

*And yet* we know that there *is* real evil, at least in the "historical" world if not in any sensible way in the "spiritual" world. We will even happily speak of evil or negative *forces* in the world – by which we mean such things as human greed or laziness or indifference, or less personal forces like the oppressive weight which culture and tradition can sometimes have. The point is, however, that this suggests that in much common religious belief, *Good* is fundamentally a "spiritual" thing insofar as it springs from *God*, but *Evil* is a secular or historical thing – something which springs from human being itself and not from outside.

Now, the problem here is not that, in order to hang on to *God* and to hang on to the idea of evil we have to believe in evil spirits in the way that Paul *seems* to believe in them, one foreign and incomprehensible belief required in order to secure the more familiar belief in *God* himself. Faith in *God* is not a matter of believing all the right stuff on a religious list – including believing that there "are" rulers, authorities and spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places, to quote from Paul again.

But I'm angling towards the way in which our belief in *God* *is* compromised if what we will or won't believe leaves us with an idea that the things of *God* are "spiritual" and that whatever *evil* is it is something which resides in the world as only a historical, secular or human reality. For this divides everything up in a way which Paul – and we as Christians – cannot accept. If we really cannot believe in evil spirits – and I doubt that many of us actually can, then we must also dispense with the idea that *God* is a "spiritual" reality – in the sense of "spirit" implied in this kind of division.

It might have been possible to say it differently in previous ages, but today the emphasis has to fall for us on the apparently historical and secular and human, so that when we say that the forces of evil are not ghosts and ghouls, demons and spirits, we have to say also that neither are the forces of good spiritual in *this way*, for we don't achieve anything helpful for ourselves in this way of thinking about *God*. This is to say that there is a confusion at the heart of modern attempts to smooth out the alien components of Christian belief, and what seems to be the historical baggage which comes our way through the scriptures.

We miss the point if we succumb to the temptation to divide heaven and earth up into separate parts and either keep them as separate things – as the believer's tries to do – or simply dispensing with heaven, as is the non-believer imagines herself to be doing. If we are to remain true to the historic confession of the incarnate, Trinitarian *God* then we have to say that if there are no forces for evil in the heavenly places, then there is no force for good there either, for such a "heaven" doesn't really matter any more".

I don't think it to be overstating the point to say that the future of the church hangs on an understanding of what this means – not only our congregation but Christian faith itself. In our "Taking the Bible Seriously" discussions over the

last few weeks we've been looking not at what it would mean to take the Bible *literally* (which might be suggested by the title of the series), but what it means to understand the character of the God who is discovered there, and the nature of God's ways in dealing with us and addressing us. The critical point has been that God deals with us as he finds us – not with a view to changing us into some perfect ideal of a human being, but bringing life to the kinds of people our particular history has made us. It is as we are – formed by our particular culture and history – that God addresses us. It is through the ideas and expectations of our particular world that we are called to faithfulness and trust.

This means that if, as is largely the case in our society today, there is really no other "heavenly" world where powers for good and evil reside, then it is in this very tangible and real world that we will meet God, through the ways of the world – always in transformation, always becoming "godly" as God touches and employs them – but always at the same time "just" worldly things.

If then, it is in any sense true for us that God has no other heaven than the world in which we now live, then that world shall become the means of God's work with us. If, as our modern society has come to understand, evil can only be believed to exist in the ins and outs of the historical world, and not in some spiritual realm, then this is also the place where (and these are also the means by which) God is to be found and, more importantly, *nowhere else*, (for there is, in this sense, now no "where" else) but the world we can touch and see.

It is because of this that what we do and say in our personal and corporate lives matters, and has direct "spiritual" significance. The battlefields of our lives here and now are the battlefields of heaven and hell. Paul argues here that it is in the very midst of our lives that what we sometimes call "spiritual" battles take place. And so he calls us to "tool up" – to be equipped with the armour and the weapons which God provides for the purpose of standing firm in the promise of the full humanity of Jesus Christ becoming ours: the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, as shoes whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

But the important point is that, just as the forces for good and the forces for evil are not wafty spiritual entities doing their thing in some invisible space, so also the belt of truth and the breastplate of righteousness and the shield faith and so on are not just nice Christian ideas to nod our heads at. They are not "spiritual" things that become ours just by virtue of our being Christian.

These are *disciplines* – *practices* – which will necessarily mark every believer who is seriously engaged in the struggle for an authentic human and Christian existence. The shield of faith is not something you just pick up off a shelf when it's needed, and neither is the helmet of salvation. The sword of the Spirit will cut off the hands of any fool who tries to wield it without sufficient training and familiarity. The breastplate of righteousness is not something we can conjure up for ourselves. If God's place is in the world, so also are his ways with us "worldly". We find a firm footing in life by attention to God's calling, through practice and discipline, through study and prayer and fellowship and lives lived in accordance with God's patterns for how we ought to relate to each other. As we learn and are influenced and trained by negative influences, so also we must continually be learning and training ourselves in Christian faith.

It is hard work being a Christian. It takes hard work to *become* a Christian, for whether the forces arrayed against human freedom are in some heavenly place or shot through the real world around us, they are powerful. There is much to hold us back, much to limit us, much to tempt us into less than the fullness of life for which we were created.

We are called, then, to stand firm in all that God has given as resources for growing in faith and understanding, for defending what God has already made of us, and for working with God in making further inroads into the realms of darkness and captivity, that we and all of God's people might take hope in the promise of coming light.

Paul ends his letter to the Ephesians with a call to them, and to us: Stand firm. Grow. Pray at all times, as the Spirit leads. Do not look back. Look only forward to the life to which we are all called, secured by what God has given us for the purpose.

It doesn't happen as if by magic. One Christian commentator has remarked that one of the reasons our Christian faith often doesn't make sense to us is that we don't have practices which reflect it and make it real. If God is only a head and heart thing – and in this sense a "spiritual" thing – then the things of God will make little sense in a world less about heart and head and spirit than it is about what we actually *do*, touch and manipulate. We need to resolve that the life of Christian discipline is the life we will live, and set up in ways that work for us habits and patterns which will strengthen us in lives of love and righteousness.

God is faithful. If he will meet us with grace even if we fail in our discipleship, how much more will

God meet and strengthen us if we seek earnestly to be shaped according to his will by preparing ourselves, putting on the armour of God, growing in knowledge of the scriptures, growing ever more confident in prayer, more accomplished in service, and more at peace in the world which God is healing.

Stand firm, Paul says to us, echoing the call of God.

By the grace of God may more of his people hear this call, and lead the way into the life of peace. Amen.