

SERMON BY LCA BISHOP JOHN HENDERSON

Worship Service at General Convention of Synod

Sunday, 4 October 2015

Text: Ephesians 6:10

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ...

So, what happens **now**?

Day by day during this Convention we have walked side by side through Ephesians. We have worshipped together, listened together, prayed together and communed together.

Day by day in the meeting room we have sat together to deliberate, elect, dialogue, debate and vote.

We have eaten together, laughed together, mourned together and cried together.

We have been together as church - God's church - the body of Christ. We have also been together as LCA, Lutherans seeking the way forward together in faith.

So, now we've done all that, what happens next?

Now we will go home. We will leave the good people of Rochedale and let them have back their chapel, and their school. We will travel to re-join our family and friends, and our fellow believers, in the places where we live.

We will go back to work, to school, to the farm, to the business, to the home, or to whatever activity our vocations engage us in.

Next Sunday, God willing, we will all attend divine service, worshipping in local congregations across Australia and New Zealand from Perth to Christchurch, from Darwin to Hobart.

And yes, we will answer many questions about the Convention.

We will do all these things and we will do more. As we set about doing them, the letter to the Ephesians asks one last thing of us. Stand firm and 'be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power'.

Be strong. That's going to be a challenge. 'Strong' means robust, sturdy, durable, solid, resilient, and tough. When I was young my father would tell me to be all of those things. Be dependable, someone that others can trust. Serve them by being reliable - do the things you have said you will do. Help others by being resilient in the tough times - and there will be tough times. Be strong; be faithful, not just in what you say, but in what you do, in who you are. Be strong enough, for instance, to know that bullying others is a sign of weakness.

Be perceptive enough to know when to seize the day and take the advantage, and when to step back for the good of the other. Be tough enough and flexible enough to pick yourself up when knocked over, dust yourself down, and just get on with it. It's not all about you. It's not all about us.

So, be strong - easier said than done. That's why the full text, which has just been read, suggests a way that we can be strong. Many of us might have read it in Sunday school, taken from the equipment used by a Roman soldier.

Now I have never seen a real Roman soldier, and I have to say it has never been my favourite way to describe the Christian life. But there you go - we don't always get to talk about our favourite things, do we?

The image is to put on the whole armour of God. The key pieces are **truth** as a belt to hold everything together, **righteousness** as a breastplate to protect our central body, and **shoes** to carry us forward with the gospel of peace. To those are added the **shield** of faith so that the devil's arrows are put down before they touch us, a **helmet** of salvation so

we keep our sense of direction, and the **sword** of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Now to me this sounds like an absurd soldier. The traditional purpose of a soldier is to wage war, and the purpose of a Christian is to wage peace.

I guess, however, in recent generations we have become familiar with the concept of the soldier peace-keeper. In that way this image can make sense. Our war has been won in Jesus Christ, but there is still the peace to keep.

Some skirmishes and battles do continue even though the war has been won. Jesus Christ has defeated Satan. Yet we still struggle against 'the rulers ...the authorities ...the powers of this dark world and ...the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms'. Left to our own devices our situation can look overwhelmingly dangerous. Destruction could be imminent. But in Christ, all the noise and shouting is just the final fling of an already defeated enemy.

What we really put on is Christ himself. He is our truth, our righteousness, our peace, the source and meaning of faith. He is the eternal word of God. He gives us the Holy Spirit.

Being strong in the Lord, then, doesn't mean turning into some sort of comic book super-hero. It is to put on Christ, to be identified with him, and he with you. His strength is our strength, and that's why we can be strong and confident.

Paul writes in Romans that 'neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord'.¹

So today, as we go our separate ways, returning to the places we came from, we do not go alone. Each of us goes with Christ. We have put him on. We wear him. Where we go, he

¹ Romans 8:38–39

goes. As we have said so often this week he keeps us together as one church, one family in him.

And finally – finally - we go with prayer. 'Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests'. Prayer unites the people of God. You could feel the power of prayer over our Convention this week. Prayer is our divine conversation with him but also with each other. It is our consolation and our encouragement.

The Scriptures tell us that Jesus prays for us. Can't you hear his voice praying with your voice every time you use the Lord's Prayer, the Our Father? Jesus was the first to speak that prayer, teaching his disciples how to speak to their heavenly Father. He, and the church along with him, has not stopped praying that prayer ever since. He joins his voice with your voice. Your prayer is his prayer.

In his advice to us about praying 'in the Spirit on all occasions', notice that St Paul does not encourage us to pray for victory, or the defeat of our enemies, or for some other outcome that would suit our human desire to win and be proven right.

He simply asks us to pray for all the saints, God's people. He also adds a particular prayer for himself, that he would be able to speak the gospel boldly and fearlessly.

When we read Ephesians we often forget that Paul was in prison at the time. He does not write in freedom, with a cup of coffee or wine by his elbow, and a comfortable bed awaiting him in the evening. No, he writes in chains. He was incarcerated because of his gospel preaching, and it ended in his death.

The soldiers on whom he based his picture of strength would have been his daily companions. All he had was his reliance on Christ. The strength he exhorts us to have is the same strength he had. To him this was no theory, no game, no lifestyle choice - this was real life, and death.

In the light of this, then, what do we have to fear? Actually, very little. Whatever has happened, or not happened, we know we can end this Convention confident in the Lord, certain that his love endures for ever, that Christ has won the victory, and that in him it is possible for us to keep the peace, to be strong, and to stand firm.

Cling to that strength. Christ is your saviour. He goes with us as we return to our homes to praise him, to worship him, and to serve him, as members of this church, and especially as his holy ones.

Go, then, in the peace and strength of the Lord.

Amen.