

Back to Basics: Spiritual Warfare
Ephesians 6:10-13
May 17, 2020

We talked last Sunday about the projected victory of the lamb over the powers of evil and the devil, that we are on the winning side, regardless of appearances. John's vision in Revelation, full of symbols of beasts rising from the sea, and monsters battling against the lamb and his followers, are powerful symbols. But the reality behind these symbols had an early appearance in Genesis. This is what God said to the serpent: *I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel. (Gen 3:15)* The battle lines were already drawn between the forces of God and evil, between the seed of Mary and of the serpent. We probably ought to take this seriously. And that is why Paul in his letters and John in the book of the Apocalypse are serious about the challenge we face as Christians in this ongoing struggle.

Our reading from Ephesians goes like this: *Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. (Eph 6:10ff)*

The war between good and evil is at the centre of four of the biggest and most popular series in television and film: Star Wars, Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter and Game of Thrones. The Potter series of books sold over a half a billion books, and were translated into 68 languages. It captured the hearts and minds of kids and adults like me. Or perhaps I'm still a child at heart whose imagination remains open and engaged by great story tellers like J.K. Rowling.

I began the first book in the late 90's and read the 7th several years ago. And like all seven books, it takes the reader into the magical world of wizardry, peopled by exotic creatures, mysterious

characters, broom sticks that fly, wands that emit powerful spells, a world of giants, dragons, and a world where spirit and matter are seemingly separated only by a thin gossamer web. And who can resist the mystical figure of Albus Dumbledore? Who is not enchanted by the dark, forbidden forest that lies close to the famous Hogwarts, school of witchcraft and wizardry?

Harry lived until he was ten with his mother's sister, her husband and their annoying son Dudley. Harry's mother and father were killed by the dark lord Voldemort when Harry was but a baby. But Voldemort was not only unable to kill the infant Harry, but mysteriously had also been fatally wounded in the attempt. Harry survived with only a scar on his forehead, a permanent reminder to Harry of Voldemort's existence and threat. With his adopted family Harry lives in what Rowling calls muggle land. On ordinary streets, in ordinary towns and cities, muggles, or ordinary humans, are largely unaware of the spiritual and magical world that exists all around them.

At ten Harry is introduced to this world when he goes to Hogwarts School to study the magical arts. That there is only a thin line separating the world of muggles and magic is captured in the mysterious platform nine and three quarters in King's Cross station in London. In the magical world there is a platform muggles know nothing about. To enter it the students, on their way to Hogwarts, walk right up and through the solid barrier between platforms nine and ten and swoosh, Harry and his friends are catapulted onto platform nine and three quarters.

The central plot of the Harry Potter novels is represented by the battle between the dark Lord Voldemort and the forces of good led by Harry. This struggle surfaces in each of the novels, reaching a hair-raising climax in each case, none more so than in book four. But these periodic confrontations will only be resolved in the final book. One can find a similar struggle between key characters in the Star War Saga, in Lord of the Rings, and in Game of Thrones. Each represents a battle between forces of good and evil.

These battles are reminiscent of the great struggle in which we as Christians are engaged. Ephesians reminds us that we are engaged

in a struggle, one that demands spiritual defences as well as weapons. You may remember the other place where Paul says:

Indeed, we live as human beings, but we do not wage war according to human standards; for the weapons of our warfare are not merely human, but they have divine power to destroy strongholds. (2 Corinthians 10:3-5)

This may all sound a bit bizarre to our modern ears as does the book of Revelation where the symbol of evil is portrayed by beasts emerging from the sea. But I'm sure many of you have had experiences when the power of evil is palpable. Great saints like Luther, who were on the front lines in the battle against the dark lord, were highly sensitive to evil's attempts to thwart the advance of God's kingdom of love and peace. When Jesus hears from the 70 who return in triumph from their mission, he says this: *He said to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."* (Luke 10:18ff)

We would be hard pressed to dismiss the presence of evil in our day. Evidence of the dark forces at work in our world is in our news media every day. Through governments of all kinds we hear of ethnic cleansing in various parts of the world, of racial bigotry and religious persecution, of economic exploitation and inequality that serve to increase poverty and oppression for millions. N.T. Wright in his commentary on Revelation, that we are using in our study, says this: *...in the world of Realpolitik, or underworld dealings, so in the world of spiritual warfare; the ultimate powers prefer not to show themselves, but to act through others.*

It seemed easier perhaps for Paul and the churches in the first century to identify the enemy. Rome was a force that openly threatened them and exercised total and often brutal control over its citizens. To be sure, today there are governments that are openly authoritarian, as was Rome. And yet even within European and North American democratic countries, with representative government and an independent judicial system, even here injustice, as well as

economic and political corruption weave its tale of woe for many. Oftentimes what the Old Testament prophets called evil, civic and economic injustice, oppression of the poor and vulnerable, is found within our political elites and their policies. This can often remain hidden in back room politics that slip into law and practice without us noticing. So it is that even democratic institutions and governments are able to perpetuate policies that benefit the privileged. And us not be naïve in thinking that empires today are any less committed to retaining power than was true of Rome.

Paul, I think, would ask the church of the 21st century to be equally vigilant. Our task is to confront these forces which are often embedded within the institutions of our Western democracies, as well as the third world. Corruption, greed, lust for power, disregard for human rights of the vulnerable and poor, injustice, and economic disparity, are forces of evil that the church is asked by Christ to speak out against. God's kingdom, throughout the bible, is set against the kingdoms of this world and their selfish ambitions for power and possession. Walter Wink writes:

Every business corporation, school, denomination, bureaucracy, sports team — indeed, social reality in all its forms — is a combination of visible and invisible, outer and inner, physical and spiritual... (The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium, New York: Doubleday, 1999)

One of the challenges for Christian churches in our time is to discern the spirits of institutions and structures. But too often the church has retired inward to what we might call, the religious or spiritual values of the faith. We want people to believe in Jesus, become Christians, live moral, spiritual lives, pray and read their bibles. All this is good and ought to be encouraged. But it is too limited! And so, our failure to be a church that addresses seriously the wide range of current issues that are in the public square, including such grave matters as Climate Change, our default position becomes "spiritual". As if God's only concern for the army of the lamb is to bring the unbelievers into the fold. Yes, that is the Gospel mandate. But there is also a creation mandate that is also central to our battle for justice and truth. If the institutions and governments are organized around idolatrous values and what Wink calls "the Domination System," they must be recalled to their divine vocation — the well-being of all individuals

Those, like us, who have chosen to follow Christ, are engaged in this struggle between good and evil whether we like it or not. The armor we asked to put on is indispensable for this battle. We are to put on truth, a gospel of peace, faith, and the Spirit. And having done all we stand, we pray, we resist to the point that our lives are swimming against the stream of society's priorities and ambitions. It is an ongoing battle. It is a battle with cosmic and eternal consequences for each of us personally. Let's be alert, sober, children of light, as Paul says elsewhere, always abounding in the work of the Lord.

Amen