

SERMON NOTES EDUCATION SUNDAY 2023

READINGS: EXODUS 12.1-14 & PSALM 149
TEXT: ROMANS 13.12

This month is the beginning of a new chapter. A new academic year, at least for some, will feel like a new start. Some of us will wake before the alarm clock summons us to the new day! Those minutes when you'd prefer to have continued asleep, your mind races with ideas, concerns and hopefully excitements which the day, the week, and the term may include.

St Paul is concerned for the Roman Christians. Surrounded and perhaps tempted as they were by the 'deeds of darkness' (how he describes what happens in the night) Paul has sound advice. Without dwelling on the negatives, it is worth reminding ourselves that the Christian is called to a different lifestyle, a counter-cultural approach to life best summed up in the Beatitudes. Jesus' deepest challenge is to a 'day-time style of living:

- ⁵ Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
- ⁷ Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.
- ⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
- ⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.¹

Within public service, you won't find many people who disagree with the Nolan Principles of selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership, even if they are not always consistently pursued by all. Whilst endorsing each of them, as Christians we could do even better if we reflect and pray over the 'armour of light' found in these classic 'blessings' of the Christian faith. This radical manifesto, alternative values and the counter-cultural life of the Kingdom of God were given to us by Jesus himself sitting on a mountainside. You may like to imagine him with the backdrop of the sun rising as the day begins, even though it may not actually have taken place at that time of day!

His teaching is not as improbable as it might seem. It has resonance for teachers who have a love and passion to reach out and speak into the lives of the next generation. That is why they entered the profession - it was with a passion for teaching, which is essentially bringing about change and the development of children. As Margaret Cooling describes these Beatitudes:

¹ Matthew 5.3-11

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Jesus is not giving us fairy-tale virtues,
he is rewriting the story.

He is tearing up the script and starting again,
giving us a new story to live by.

In his story, the rejected are counted amongst the winners,
love reaches out to the undeserving
and the guilty are forgiven.

In Jesus' story God gives up everything to become one of us
and love wins through suffering.

In his story, the proud are dethroned
and the humble exalted,
the first become the last
and the last become the first.

In his story, the meek do inherit the earth.²

Whether you are the giver, teacher and model of Christ's example, or the recipient as a child, a parent and others, this tall order for Christian living is not achieved in isolation. Paul is writing to a community of Christians. God first called a nation to Himself and now in Jesus extended the 'blessing' of being God's people, to all who call themselves Christians. That's why Education Sunday is also a call to the church to support and engage with its community of educators.

In Church schools, with their Christian vision, and (in the Church of England) under the overarching vision of being Deeply Christian, Serving the Common Good, there is every opportunity to become a community that explores together what this means in practice. It is worth headteachers and governors considering how to nurture a sense of community amongst their teams.

Thankfully, God has not left us without many indications of how he will equip and protect us. The expression 'armour of light' reminds us of the 'armour of God' in Ephesians 6.

**¹¹ "Put on the full armour of God,
so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes."**

² Cooling, M, Preaching that Shows, The Beatitudes: Blessed are the Meek, <https://preachingthatshows.wpcomstaging.com/2018/10/10/the-beatitudes-blessed-are-the-meek/> Accessed 30.6.23

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Paul implores us and develops what he meant in today's text (Romans 12). Picking up each distinctive piece of armour to a soldier is as normal as getting dressed each morning is to us. So, it should be for all Christians, if not mentally doing so morning by morning, certainly intentionally reflecting on what the breastplate, shield and so on means as to how we live and depend upon the provision of God.

It is doubtless no mistake that Paul starts his armour detail with the 'belt of truth buckled round your waist'.³ A belt can be decorative but for many, it is essential item if our clothing if it is to stay in place, without disaster and embarrassment, even humiliation, which otherwise might be the unintended outcome! This 'belt of truth'⁴ could refer to the Word of God, our Bible. It is there that we find our spiritual refreshment, direction and correction. The Psalms constantly remind us of the importance of the Law of the Lord for our flourishing (referring at least to that part of our Bible that was available when this poetry was written but now appropriate for all 66 books). It is no mistake that the first Psalm expresses this with a metaphor anyone can appreciate:

That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither – whatever they do prospers.⁵

If you know the original story of the Passover (in Exodus 12.1-14) the catastrophic terrible happenings in the plagues experienced in Egypt culminated in a night of terror [*possibly omitting here the details if children are present in the service*] which every Hebrew household was kept safe from. Why? Because they were pre-warned, **obedient**, and sheltered under the protection that God provided. That evening, on God's instruction through Moses their leader, they painted the blood of a lamb they were roasting for dinner on their doorframes. This was to be a sign of protection and the beginning of their journey from slavery, out of Egypt, through the parted waters of the Red Sea and into the Promised Land.

From the dark night during which they had suffered for 430 years⁶ as slaves, the sun was rising and daytime beginning. It is unthinkable what it meant for any families that did not obey God's promise and what they missed out on. Thankfully, and at last thousands upon thousands were able to make the journey. We can only imagine the relief, the joy and the flourishing they enjoyed as they journeyed. Every year since then Jews have celebrated this 'Passover'. They won't have sung the penultimate Psalm in our Bibles (Psalm 149) back then as they do now, but it contains the sentiments that would have been on their lips:

Praise the Lord. Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of his faithful people.

² Let Israel rejoice in their Maker; let the people of Zion be glad in their King.

³ Let them praise his name with dancing and make music to him with tambourine and harp.

³ Ephesians 6.14 (NIV)

⁴ Ephesians 6.14 Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth" (KJV)

⁵ Psalms 1.3 NIV

⁶ Exodus 12.40-41



Today Jews and Christians regularly (even daily) use this Psalm to express their praise to the God who delivers, protects, and blesses His people. These words could also be the outpouring of your praise as you step over the threshold of your school tomorrow. They are part of the 'armour of light' you need to face whatever the day brings. This is a reminder of what God did, is doing and will do as you live in the light serving the one who said,

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”⁷

Jesus went on to commission us as his followers to be the same when he said,

“You are the light of the world.”⁸

Whatever your fashion sense, or lack of, there is one outfit you always need to face the day. Every Christian, in education or not, needs to know what God requires of them and the right way to be clothed to obey Him, the 'armour of light' or as the chapter ends:

⁴“ Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁹

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⁷ John 8.12 NIV

⁸ Matthew 5.14-16

⁹ Romans 13. 14

