

**St. Ninian's Parish Church**  
**Sunday 26th August 2018**

*John 6: 56 - 69; Ephesians 6: 1 - 10*

*Almighty God, your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ is the light of the world. May your people, illuminated by your Word, shine with radiance of his glory, that his love may be known in the world as he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit one God, now and forever. Amen.*

Every year our Government spends about 40% of the United Kingdom's GDP (its Gross Domestic Product): of the wealth that we all earn in this country every year, the Government spends about 40% of it, raising that money through taxes and other sources. That figure of 40% hasn't changed very much over the past 50 years. But, what has changed completely is how the Government spends that money.

Back in the 1950s the Government spent a lot of that money on defence. Back then the Government spent 10% of the money we earned on defence. Back then, in the 1950s, the Government spent as much on defence as it spent on education, the NHS and social security *put together!* In the 1950s the Government spent 10% of our wealth on defence, and 11% on education, the NHS and social security together.

In the decade following the 2nd World War the Government valued destroyers, bombers and tanks more than schools, hospitals, and financial help for those who, for example, had lost their job or who had become parents.

Things have changed. Fifty years on, in the opening years of the 21st century, the Government spends about the same proportion of the country's wealth, 40%, but it spends it on vastly different things. Instead of 10%, today only about two and a half percent of our wealth is spent on defence; a quarter of what it was 50 years ago. And, instead of 11%, today we spend almost three times that amount, 30%, on education, the NHS and social security put together.

"...our fight is not against human foes, but against cosmic powers,"<sup>1</sup> wrote Paul, the author of a letter to the Christians in Ephesus 2,000 years ago, a part of which we read this morning, "...our fight is not against human foes," he wrote to those Ephesian Christians, "but against cosmic powers..."

Today, in the 21st century we might agree with what Paul wrote 2,000 years ago. Today, if what our Government spends our wealth on is any indicator, our fight is not against human foes (or not much, anyway), but against the cosmic powers of disease, ignorance and poverty, represented in the Government's budget by education, health and welfare.

Of course, that is not true everywhere in the world. 2,000 years ago Paul could write these words because he was a Roman citizen and for Roman citizens living

---

<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 6: 12

within the Roman Empire, for the most part, peace reigned. Paul could talk metaphorically about donning armour, belt and sword, as he did in the passage we read, mainly because he was never forced to don them literally. We too can be grateful that we don't live in Syria, for example, or South Sudan where war and violence are prevalent and deadly.

Having said that, for those civilians who are caught up in the crossfire of conflicts throughout the world they are, in fact, less likely to die as a consequence of violence - bombs and bullets - than they are to succumb to the more abstract, or what Paul calls cosmic, forces of disease or hunger, in wartime.

To put it another way, everywhere in the world, in order to secure the health and wellbeing of children like Ella, new parents such as Linda and Daniel don't start life as parents by building walls and a moat around their homes, and arming themselves with a weapon. Instead, they look for a good doctor; hope for a good school in the future; and find a job to put food on the table.

It is not just new parents, of course, who are threatened by hostile abstract forces such as ignorance or disease or poverty, we all are. In this world, we are all confronted, in different ways at different times of our lives, by the question, 'what keeps us safe?' or to put it in terms that religions, particularly Christianity have expressed it, 'how are we to be saved?'

The very first disciples of Jesus were haunted by that very question back in their day, 2,000 years ago. As we read in the Gospel of John this morning, the disciple Peter and his 11 colleagues, when confronted with Jesus' question to them, "Do you also want to leave me?" answered, "Lord to whom shall we go?" Who or what will save us?

By contrast, those who had left Jesus and no longer followed him had done so because they wanted a military leader, a messiah king who would raise an army and conquer Rome, to save them. They wanted the sort of God who would institute the kind of martial rule that many people in the world then and now mistakenly think is capable of saving them; a strongman. Vladimir Putin might be an example today.

Instead, what Jesus offered was belief in a God who would suffer in order to understand our suffering; a God who advocated peace, not war; justice for everyone, not just the powerful; mercy rather than revenge; and love rather than selfish greed. This was a God whose spending priorities were more akin to health, education and welfare than defence. Or, as Paul wrote, a God who, for example, offers not armour made of steel, but armour that is made up of truth and peace, not to mention faith to overcome despair when the going gets rough.

When it comes to our well-being people's priorities in every age are often misplaced. Paul encouraged his fellow Christians in Ephesus to dispense with armour, shield and sword to protect themselves, and to put their faith elsewhere. Jesus called on his followers to do something similar. Today, when we ask ourselves

what is it that will save us in this world, what will help us to live life in all its fullness, too often we forget to prioritise the things that really matter.

As I'm sure Linda and Daniel will discover the things that will determine Ella's health and happiness most in the future are less likely to be material prosperity, and more likely to be the abstract things she will inherit from them in her earliest years: the nurture and love they have to offer; the culture they introduce her to; the social communities she grows up in; as well as the genetic inheritance that they will pass on to her.

That is why today, Ella's baptism is no small matter. Today, we as a community of Christians, of family, of friends, and of parents make a commitment to Ella that prioritises the divine principals of love and nurture, which will undergird her upbringing, and that will play the most important part in her ability to live life in all its fullness in the future.

Jesus was clear that through him God was offering salvation for the entire world. By believing in him, God saves by giving us the faith to prioritise the building of just, loving, merciful communities, rather than communities made up of walls, barricades and the threat of war.

Writing in the Financial Times last weekend, Robin Dunbar, a professor of evolutionary biology at the University of Oxford, asked his readers the same question that Peter asked Jesus ('to whom shall we go), but in a slightly different way. His article<sup>2</sup> in the newspaper asked his readers the question, 'why do we drink'? He went on to argue that drinking, in moderation, is the secret to humanity's success as it lubricates social engagement. Friendships, he argued, are the most important things for our well-being.

"One of the biggest surprises of the last decade or so," wrote Prof Dunbar, "has been the torrent of publications showing that our happiness, health and susceptibility to disease — even our speed of recovery from surgery and how long we live — are all influenced by the number of friends we have.

...one study ... [sought] ... to determine what it was that best predicted the probability of surviving for 12 months after your first heart attack... And the best predictor? The number and quality of friendships you had. A short way behind that was giving up smoking (no surprises there). Then, way further down in terms of impact came exercise, obesity, alcohol consumption, quality of diet and even air quality. It seems you can eat, drink and slob about as much as you want," wrote Prof Dunbar, "and it won't affect your chances anything like as much as having a few good friends to go out with."

What will save you in this life? And to whom should you go for that salvation. If your Ella's age then parents who will love and nurture you should do the trick. If your older, then a community-life made up of good friends will make all the

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/c5ce0834-9a64-11e8-9702-5946bae86e6d>

difference. How do find love, nurture, community, and friendships? Paul was on the right track,

"...take up God's armour; then you will be able to stand your ground when things are at their worst... Fasten on the belt of *truth*; for the coat of mail put on *integrity*; let the shoes on your feet be the gospel of *peace*, to give you firm footing..." Honesty, sincerity and kindness all help to build friendships.

"Take up the great shield of faith," Paul wrote. In other words, have faith in a way of life that cares for others, respects their dignity, and is merciful in its judgemental justice. As a sword, he writes, take that which the Spirit gives you - the words that come from God. In other words, take care of what you say to others, and how you say it.

In our lives we need to start believing that the foes we face in this world are not other people. The foes we face are not human; they are spiritual, they are things like ignorance, disease and hunger. In this life, in our world, other people, human beings, are our allies, not our foes. In Jesus Christ, God lived as a human being, as our ally, precisely to demonstrate this truth. As Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, to whom shall we go? Your words are words of eternal life. We have faith, and we know that you are the Holy One of God."<sup>3</sup>

*Now to the one who can keep you from falling and set you in the presence of his glory, jubilant and above reproach, to the only God our saviour, be glory and majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all time, now, and for evermore. Amen.*

---

<sup>3</sup> John 6: 69