**Morning Praise @ Home**

**Opening prayer**

Blessed are you, God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, you have blessed us with every spiritual blessing; enable us by your power to be true to our calling and live holy and blameless lives before you all our days, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever. **Amen**

**Confession** Let us admit to God the sin which always confronts us.

**Lord God, we have sinned against you; we have done evil in your sight. We are sorry and**

**repent.** **Have mercy on us according to your love. Wash away our wrongdoing and cleanse us**

**from our sin.** **Renew a right spirit within us** **and restore us to the joy of your salvation,** **through**

**Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen** cf Psalm 51

**Absolution** May the Father of all mercies cleanse us from our sins, and restore us in his image

to the praise and glory of his name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

### Bible Reading John 10:1-10

###  Ephesians 6:10-20

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**Reflection** Standing our ground for God

1. OUR ENEMY IS REAL

33 years ago, the will of the Ukrainian people was to break free from control by the Kremlin in the then Soviet Union, and declare that they were an autonomous and independent country. They reasserted their desire to speak their native language and follow their native customs. And now the Kremlin has retaliated. It is seeking to usurp Ukraine’s sovereignty, believing that its citizens should still belong to them. Putin doesn’t want to accept the diminishing of Soviet power and is trying to snatch it back again.

For the last 2 years we have witnessed his tactics – sometimes all-out assault, sometime tactical retreats in order to advance elsewhere; sometimes placing hidden mines for the unwary; often making false accusations and twisting interpretation of events; always seeking to demoralise and undermine. The Ukrainians are under constant attack, so need to stand firm, using every defence available to them, determined not to give in, not to waver, if their freedom is to be retained.

It’s a helpful analogy of how God’s dark enemies are behaving. They are as real and malevolent as Putin – in the New Testament Jesus regularly confronted and called them out. When Christ overcame death and evil by rising from the dead and ascending to his heavenly throne, he liberated all those who placed their faith in his achievement, freeing them from subjection to darkness to receive life in all its light and fullness – and the dark powers don’t like it. They refuse to recognise that believers want to be free and follow Christ, and are constantly trying a variety of ways to re-establish their control.

Like Ukrainian soldiers, Christians are the ones at the front line of this confrontation and we need all the help and protection God can give us. Satan’s hatred of God’s victorious Son, and therefore his followers, is real. We should neither dismiss or trivialise it, nor be obsessed by it, but be realistic about the struggle all believers are engaged in - and the weapons we have at our disposal.

2. OUR EQUIPMENT IS PROVIDED

Paul lists them here, helping his readers visualise what he means via the image of the armed Roman soldiers that the Ephesians saw on every street. If you have ever encountered one of the ‘centurions’ directing primary school ‘Roman legions’ which regularly march the streets of Chester, you will be familiar with what he’s referring to.

But rather than think of the shield, sword, belt and breastplate, helmet and foot-ware as unwieldy items in our armoury, for us today, it is more important to remember that we defeat our unseen, cosmic enemy simply by living out our faith and holding on to what we’ve received.

In our church services we proclaim as true that Jesus reigns, having defeated death and paid for our wrongdoing, so that we can enter into ‘the communion of the saints’. These facts hold us together, both as a community and individually, like the security a belt provides in keeping our clothes in place. But truth is also required of us – Jesus’ followers must speak and act truthfully and lovingly – our integrity matters. How many times do we see leaders fall because their private actions have not lived up to the words they proclaim or office they hold!

Righteousness is allied to this – Christians are called to ‘to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly’ following Jesus. Our unseen enemy will try to condemn us, that we ourselves are not living up to God’s standards. But we need to remember that, as a breastplate covers the heart, so God has covered our hearts with the saving blood of Christ – when He looks at each Christian, God regards them through the prism of His beloved Son… so Satan’s condemnation can be dismissed: we are set right with our Father!

• In that assurance, imagine yourself stepping out in your interactions with others as a warrior for justice!

• When gossip and sly insinuation is spread, make it your job to counter it and honour one another.

• When we see wrongdoing in public and private life, we are to blow the whistle.

In these ways, righteousness can counter the father of lies.

And Paul does encourage us to be bold, to make the most of every initiative to further God’s kingdom, just as an enterprising soldier seeks to advance their front line. We aren’t part of this worshipping community in order to let our friends and neighbours gently slide towards death, but are commissioned to be ready to communicate the ‘gospel of peace’ in whatever situation we find ourselves.

• It is not arrogant for a Christian to assert that faith in Jesus is the only way to be saved for eternal reconciliation with God, because that is what Jesus himself proclaimed in John 14: ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’

• As faithful followers, we need to prioritise the means of our non-believing friends and neighbours discovering the peace of being embraced by their eternal Father.

Since the start of the scriptures, one of our enemy’s favourite tactics is to sow doubt and confusion: ‘Did God really say…?’ Whilst it is never wrong to question and explore God’s Word, when we know that Satan is trying to spread demoralisation and despair (as Putin tries to) we need to shield ourselves with faith in the truths of what Jesus has accomplished, demonstrating God enormous love for us. We need to actively choose to believe, just as a Roman soldier needed to ‘take up’ their large, body-covering shield so that enemies couldn’t find any vulnerable area to pierce. When difficult circumstances, doubt, temptation or tragedy come our way, we need to tell the accuser: ‘No, I am saved; no, I am loved; no, Christ Jesus has been, is and will be victorious over your powers of darkness.’

The ‘helmet of salvation’ extends this protection. Our minds and imaginations are particularly vulnerable, which is why it matters what we let them dwell on. Becoming personally familiar with Scripture means it can fill our minds with the right knowledge.

• We so easily fall into patterns of thinking which trap us into unhelpful ways of responding, delighting the enemy. Yet Jesus invites us to think afresh – to love like He did on earth, to forgive rather than rehearse wrongs, to trust that God is in control, relying on our hope of complete reconciliation with our Father.

• The Bible assures us that we are saved, we’ve been freed from the enemy’s control and, like the Ukrainians, must refuse to be ensnared again.

That freedom and hope is what the Word of God holds out to others. As we explain the good news to others, so God accomplishes His powerful, cleansing work in people’s hearts and lives. Whilst everything Paul has mentioned thus far is protective, he envisages us as actually thrusting the light of God’s saving power out into the darkness so as to scatter it. And we don’t do this blindly – no, like soldiers receiving ‘on the ground’ reports in their headsets about how and when to proceed, we are to co-operate with the Holy Spirit, allowing Him to guide and prompt us. Christ’s Spirit knows what’s around the corner, what is hidden in the recesses of another’s heart, and will help us recall relevant truths from Scripture, and give us the words and actions to commend our faith.

That is why Paul urges us to pray on every occasion, using every type of prayer and request, all the time and for all those alongside us in the front-line. It is through conversation with God that we can hear what the Spirit is saying to us, can respond to His nudge to step out. Will you trust His voice and follow what He says?

3. OUR RESPONSE IS REQUIRED

You see, although God provides the equipment, our response is also required. The conflict we’re involved in doesn’t depend on our personal steadfastness – we’d never have enough; but neither are we to be lax about holding our bit of the front line, assuming that God and others will shoulder the burden. Since his heart attack, John has been prescribed a range of pills to safeguard him – but it is up to him to take them … or face the consequences. In our struggle against the enemies of Christ, although God is the one who provides the resources we need, we in turn need to ‘take up’ and utilise them for ourselves. We are called to live out the truths we have been taught and the freedom we have been granted through our allegiance to Jesus. As His brother James summed up in another NT letter: ‘Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.’

So, what has this passage from Ephesians told us? As The Message translation puts it:

‘God is strong, and he wants you strong. So take everything the Master has set out for you, well-made weapons of the best materials. And put them to use so you will be able to stand up to everything the Devil throws your way. This is no weekend war that we’ll walk away from and forget about in a couple of hours. This is for keeps, a life-or-death fight to the finish against the Devil and all his angels.

‘Be prepared. You’re up against far more than you can handle on your own. Take all the help you can get, every weapon God has issued, so that when it’s all over bar the shouting you’ll still be on your feet. Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation are more than words. Learn how to apply them. You’ll need them throughout your life. God’s Word is an indispensable weapon. In the same way, prayer is essential in this ongoing warfare. Pray hard and long. Pray for your brothers and sisters. Keep your eyes open [and] keep each other’s spirits up so that no one falls behind or drops out.’

**AMEN**

**Affirmation of faith**

Do you believe and trust in God the Father, source of all being and life, the one for whom we exist?

**We believe and trust in him.**

Do you believe and trust in God the Son, who took our human nature, died for us and rose again?

**We believe and trust in him.**

Do you believe and trust in God the Holy Spirit, who gives life to the people of God and makes Christ known in the world?

**We believe and trust in him. This is the faith of the Church.**

**This is our faith. We believe and trust in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

**Prayers of intercession**

Lord, we thank you for the beauty of your creation, as we are able to enjoy the wonderful blossoms, the blooming flowers, and the greening of the trees and hedges.

Help us to find peace and calm in the majesty of your creation and express our gratitude for the beauty of our surrounding countryside.

Lord we ask you to be with all those in our local communities who are unwell, be that with illness, infirmity, or who are suffering loneliness or depression.

Help us to show understanding and compassion towards any who are suffering, in any way. Help us to offer practical help, or even just stopping and listening and sharing our valuable time.

We thank you for those who volunteer their time to help those in need in the community.

Father we pray for our church, and for the continued recovery and healing of our vicar John.

We thank you for all those who help with all the different regular activities. For those who help work with Messy Church, Open the Book in our local schools, our older teens, for the mothers, for our seniors.

We pray for the wider world Lord. For the terrible conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine. For all those displaced by war.

The world seems at the brink of wider conflict, so Lord we ask for your peace and understanding between nations. Thwart the greedy and nationalistic ambitions of some world leaders.

We pray for a year which sees many  elections around the world.

We ask that you help guide voters as thy try to determine how they should vote, that they focus not on single issue agenda, but what they believe is best for justice, peace and stability.

Help us in this coming week Lord as we live our lives. Help us to live by faith and trusting in you. **Amen**

Merciful Father, **accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen**

**The Lord’s Prayer** As our Saviour taught us, so we pray

***Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name, Thy kingdom come,******Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen***

**Closing prayer**

God give you grace to become the people He has called you to be, that you may live and work to his praise and glory, and the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us and remain with us always. **Amen**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. **In the name of Christ. Amen**