

Flis Banks, Reader  
Christ Church West Wimbledon  
Sermon :  
“Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity,” August 22, 2021

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**SERMON : JOHN CHAPTER 10:11-18**  
**WHOLE ARMOUR OF GOD: EPHESIANS 6:10-20**

The whole armour of God. Such a beautiful and vivid set of images. Unusual among passages in the Epistles, which are generally written in earnest prose, dealing with knotty theological issues or moral and spiritual exhortations. But as we know from Jesus’ teaching in the Gospels, vivid and beautiful images are a very memorable teaching mechanism, and maybe the better for making us work at sorting out the moral and theological implications. And not only us older generations, but also the children. These images of the armour of God, are perhaps second only to Noah’s ark as the subject of large and complex children’s art works. Indeed, one such forms my favourite memory of the three months or so that I spent at St George’s Parish on the edge of the St Hellier housing estate, on secondment as part of my ministry training. The Sunday school report-back, displayed a young lad in his rather crumpled foil breast plate and helmet, with his wooden sword, absolutely bursting with pride at the magnificence of his outfit, and his key role in the art project. Now there is a lad who will never forget the importance of maintaining the full armour of God.

And I’ve been thinking about the teaching of the young for another reason – we’ve spent most of the last month staying at our favourite UK holiday destination, in Bamburgh in Northumberland, with first one set of two grandchildren and then the other two. Our eldest grandchild graduated on this holiday from the management of water, digging pools and drainage ditches over large sections of the beach, to climbing and wildlife studies, clambering over the large and very rugged Northumbrian rocks in search of sea creatures in the tide pools. Our searches were rewarded by three remarkable successes – Matthew saw a small crab shedding its shell and exoskeleton ready for its next growth spurt; he caught no fewer than nine shrimps in one tide pool and caught a three inch wide crab in another. Ecological lessons for us all included the fact that we had to walk a long way past the sections of the beach well populated by humans to reach the sections better populated by sea creatures.

Humanity does have an impact that seriously needs to be managed. And the second lesson is the sacrifices that need to be made in the furtherance of that goal – it was a real (if passing) grief to Matthew that the crab and shrimps did have to be released from their over-warm and cramped temporary home in a plastic bucket back into their comfortable tide pools.

Passing on the Christian faith to children in this ever increasingly secular world, can be difficult. Actually, no problem with Matthew and his younger brother Nathan, who are regular congregation members at our namesake church, Christ Church, New Malden. Prayers and bible stories are a regular feature of their bedtime routine, as is the routine of grace before meals. But my other two grandchildren are a different issue. They are being brought up in an entirely secular environment. I had thought that my son in law was sufficiently agnostic that I would be safe in passing on my own faith in such matters as correcting Ben's impression that Jesus is dead, and no longer available to talk to. But my daughter warned me that he is in fact an atheist, and that I need to be more careful in how far I go. I don't want to be banned from all discussion of my faith, or worse. It would be no help in encouraging the children to develop a faith in later life if they associate it with family conflict and dissention. Rather, I'd like them to at least to be familiar with the general concept that religious belief is a reasonable proposition, not something foreign, unreasonable or inconsistent with rational thought. That the church is something that they can always join, and would be welcomed with open arms, not a daunting and unfamiliar place.

In this, I am helped by two factors that remain in even the most secular of environments. Our church buildings are almost all impressive and attractive buildings – often extremely beautiful – and set in the hearts of all our communities. They are often used for secular as well as religious purposes, such as concerts and as tourist destinations, and their people often work alone or in alliance with secular charities or those of other faiths, to promote the general good. Even the most atheistic and secular people cannot dispute the desirability of the church acting in these contexts – and also promoting indirectly the desirability of actually going into a church building, and feeling comfortable there.

And the second advantage we have, even in secular contexts, is the beauty and attractiveness of some of our bible images and stories. We can go on telling our grandchildren the bible stories and passing on the images. No-one can dispute the

moral messages too, from a secular as well as a religious point of view, in many if not all of them. Such as the downsides and general impossibility of trying to avoid your clear responsibilities, as with Jonah; the need to plan for environmental disaster, and if possible to avoid it, as with Noah; and the humanity and often superior morality of people of different races, as with the Good Samaritan. And do you remember the story of Balaam's ass, where the (usually) dumb animal could see the coming disaster for his master and avoided it, even at the expense of considerable punishment. Let's try to stop unnecessarily punishing "dumb" nature, and rather recognise our own blindness in many such matters, and bring up our children to do the same, to our utmost reasonable ability.

In the name of the Father...