

Sermon Onward Christian Soldiers

Revelation 12:7-12

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About 100 years ago, when the British Empire was in full swing and Britannia ruled the waves, someone wrote the Christian song "Onward Christian soldier, marching as to war...". It was actually written by a woman, Sabine Baring-Gould. I am not sure she understood much of marching and war.

I love the marching rhythm of the song but I can surely not let my congregation sing this. As if our Christian faith is a matter of fighting, winning, conquering...

But that was the language of Christianity in the time of the Empire; I think not many feel comfortable with this today.

But actually, does the Bible not also use language of fighting, and victory, and defeating the enemies? Is there no war going on?

1 War in heaven

Surely! We have read today that war broke out in heaven. Our own Archangel St Michael, the patron saint of your church in Wellington and our church here in Heliopolis, he led his army of good angels in warfare.

The dragon and his angels fought back, but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

I hope you can forgive me - I have never been a great fan of Starwars and similar Science Fiction movies. But in our bible reading we do seem to come across some serious star wars fighting.

How do we envision this? St Michael with his sword **[PICK UP SWORD]** fighting against the devil and his wicked companions? That is certainly the sort of imagery that the bible uses. This is, I think, because when we think of war, and defeating evil, and victory, we as humans tend to think in those terms.

This machete by the way we took from a gang of Sudanese refugees when they attacked some youth from our Sudanese refugee congregation. Troubles all around. And recently we had to

pay for the operation of a young man who lost part of his scalp when in the street of our church he was robbed of his mobile phone. These are the small problems we deal with here.

We are currently plagued here in the Middle East, and to a lesser extent in some western countries, by much bigger troubles - by the extremists of the so-called Islamic State, and I think we have the right to call that movement seriously evil. Very evil. Demonic. The devil and his angels have been thrown out of heaven and onto this world.

There is no denying, I think, that the bombs and weapons used against ISIS in Syria, Libya, Iraq, are really effective.

There are wars where weapons are needed. When the usage of real violence is the only way to defeat the bigger evil. Christians can never be happy with this, and we must be lovers of peace, but there comes a moment when for the sake of peace, even as Christians we agree that violence is needed.

What is this story of St Michael defeating the devil and kicking him out of heaven? Was this warfare of brute force?

It was not.

2 How the war was won - Victory by Christ's sacrifice

The warfare we read of, is not some futurist description by John of an end-times scenario. John describes history. He describes to us what had already happened when he wrote this.

It do not know much about the role of the angels in God's victory over evil - but we know for a fact - that is, a biblical fact - that the one who actually defeated all evil in heaven and on earth, is Jesus Christ.

In Revelation 5, you can read:

The Lion of the tribe of Judah [...] has conquered [...]

So the fighting of the angels only occurs after Jesus has already been victorious.

Jesus our Lord was victorious over all evil. And the angels, led by St Michael, were allowed to then clean heaven from all evil. Let us think for some moments about this.

Jesus is called the lion of Judah; a lion is a majestic animal and a great symbol of victory. But when John looks closer at this lion, what does he see, still in Revelation 5:

And [...] I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain.

A lion is a great symbol of Jesus' victory. But that victory was achieved in the manner of a lamb that was slaughtered. Not by the roar of victory, but by the pain of the lamb that is killed.

In the book of Hebrews, we see that Jesus as our high priest went through the heavens to present himself as the perfect sacrifice to God. He entered into heaven on our behalf, to appear in the presence of God, to put away sin by his own sacrifice **to purify heaven of all things unclean**. These words come from Hebrews 9 - to purify heaven of all things unclean.

The apostle Paul has a similar theology. In his letter to the Colossians, he writes that

God [has] forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. [By doing so,] He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them.

The spiritual powers, Paul says, have been put to shame - they have shown the extent of their evil by killing the Lord of Life. And they have been disarmed. They can no longer accuse you of sins.

The devil is shamed and disarmed... by the Lion? By the Lamb. It was as the faithful and suffering lamb that Jesus secured victory in the cosmic battle. John describes this in epic terms in Revelation 12. War in heaven, and Michael and his angels are able to kick evil out of heaven.

This language itches, does it not? It is metaphorical language. How else can we understand anything of the world of God. We have no other language to help us understand spiritual realities.

Before Christ, we read in the book of Job that the devil could come to God in heaven, and accuse Job. He could do that because sin had tainted the universe. Including the heavens - as that was the area where evil had begun.

After Christ, the heavens have been secured by God, for good. Evil can no longer create a wedge between God and you - because your sins are dealt with. God closed the doors of heaven for anyone who wants to accuse you. You are totally, forever, right with God.

Do you see how wonderful this is? For God, you are perfect.

The dwelling place of God has been secured; evil has been evicted forever.

3 How the war on earth will be won - our victory

John, in his book of Revelation, then hears a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming,

Now have come the salvation and the power
and the kingdom of our God
and the authority of his Messiah,
for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down,
who accuses them day and night before our God.

The backbone of evil has been broken. There is no longer any place for evil in the presence of God.

But - in epic and metaphorical language, John then writes that whereas heaven has been secured, evil has now come to our world.

But woe to the earth and the sea,
for the devil has come down to you
with great wrath,
because he knows that his time is short!

So after Christ gained his D-Day victory, the battleground shifted from heaven to earth. The decisive battle has been won. But we now face the show and we wait for V-day - final victory.

Here in Egypt we face the show. Evil is strong. Evil of poverty, of oppression, of a lack of Christian liberties, of religious extremism. In our surrounding countries it is even worse - in Syria, Iraq, Sudan, Libia. Sometimes it seems that evil truly rules on earth.

And in New Zealand? May I suggest that in our western world, where we live our christian lives in great freedom? May I suggest that the evil forces that surround us have names like 'secularism', or 'who cares about refugees', or 'why should we care about those poor countries'.

In our western countries we also face the show of the evil one who was thrown onto the earth. Look at the candidates for the presidency in the USA...

Heaven has been secured, but how do we conquer evil in our world?

In the way of Jesus. For us on earth, our warfare, is not with weapons of mass destruction or with guns. It is by weakness. It is spiritual.

John writes:

They have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb
and by the word of their testimony,
for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.

So John specifically mentions three things for being victorious as Christians.

It is the blood of Christ that makes us victorious. What he did for us. Our forgiveness of sins and being connected with God through his grace. If you hear this voice in your ear - you are not good enough, why not give up - you are a lousy Christian anyway... then our Lord roars in your defence - Your sins are forgiven. God embraces you with all his being.

And it is by the word of your testimony that you can be victorious. Our spiritual victory in this dark world, cannot do without speech. We have to speak of Jesus Christ.

And thirdly, victory is for those who do not cling to this life. Jesus died, and we may die.

Surely we love this life. Surely we enjoy it. But our life is a battleground, so be careful. If we enjoy it too much, it may be because we have been lulled into sleep and because we ignore the reality of the spiritual battle that goes on around us.

St Michael was able to defeat the forces of evil in heaven - based on the victory of Christ.

And we, we are called to defeat the forces of evil around us... based on the victory of Christ.

We meet those forces of evil when people stand up against God. When people fight wars. When refugees are ignored. When an old man in his home dies alone because no-one cared for him. Where people do not pay attention to each other. Where in church we cannot live in love and peace together. Where we accept secularism; when we stop talking about Christ in the public arena.

Those forces of evil have lulled us into sleep if we feel too comfortable in this life.

Conclusion

Friends, you in Wellington and we here in Cairo, we are part of a cosmic battle. Do not fall asleep but be wide awake to see what is going on.

And let us commit ourselves again to Jesus Christ - the Lamb. The vulnerability of his cross is also the way forward for us. Take some time today to consider, in what areas of my life should I show more Christ-like weakness and less carnal strength?

And let us speak of Christ to our friends. By the word of our testimony we conquer evil around us. We are all called by God to stand for what is good and for what is true. Even if that is at our own expense.

Amen