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Dear Friends

"Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication" Ephesians 6 v 59-69

This week I have been waking at around 4am and not being able to return to sleep. I wonder if you have the same problem from time to time. It's generally felt that if you can't sleep it's because your mind is overactive or that you have had enough sleep. I think the latter is the most common reason.

I am sure you, like me, are finding the horrific events in Afghanistan disturbing. While we may have mixed feeling about the presence of the troops in the country, we all feared what may happen when they withdrew. One US Spokesman said that they were unprepared for the speed at which the political situation had changed and, I quote, *"the US failed to understand the social and political implications"*. This is, of course, true of many nations.

While I sit here at home watching the Welsh Fire team playing cricket in Sophia Gardens, all these news reports are reeling in my head and I think about the bowler Qais Amed, only 21 years of age from Kabul in Afghanistan. Qais, whose family still lives in Kabul, has to watch the events unfold before his eyes while separated from his family. How on earth must this poor man be feeling? News reports on Wednesday stated that the Welsh Fire team are supporting him as best they can. The tournament finished on Thursday so what is he to do, go home? We can't begin to imagine it, can we?



We all know that power politics, of which the UK has been a part, has attempted to help to keep the peace, but feel that they have failed, and the government has been forthcoming in admitting that, but it seems to me that blame dominates in the political arena. The decades old civil war never really ended and the blame game continues.

It's difficult to know how much of the media coverage is really giving us the truth. The news is dominated by political powers. According to the Taliban they took over with no fight.

However Peymana Assad, a councillor in Harrow in London, returned to the UK and spoke of how an Afghan family provided her refuge and how privileged she was to have escaped, but has a deep sadness in her heart for those left behind. Peymana said *"I feel totally helpless as my people are abandoned and control has been taken through violence"*.

The press reports that the UK will house 20 thousand refugees over five years as part of a resettlement plan, mostly woman and children, but there's a fear that many will already begin fleeing to Pakistan and to the neighbouring countries. The UK has faced criticism from other nations and individuals, that this simply isn't enough. So what are we to do? I don't profess to be someone who is up on politics but maybe we should stop the blame game for a start?

Our readings for this week all seem to speak about belief and the importance of believing. While we enjoy the privilege of choosing what to believe others are forced to compromise theirs because of fear.

St Paul writes to the Ephesian community, geographically placed in Asia minor in modern day Turkey. Paul is speaking to the Christian community, a minority people who are dominated by Roman rule; people who were persecuted for their beliefs, discriminated against and suppressed. They would have been forced into worshipping the Emperor, the one in power, or often face execution if they failed to do so. The Greco Roman world was a place where the cosmic forces of good and evil were applied to understanding their religious beliefs. This is the context into which Paul is writing as we consider the conclusion to his letter today.

The Roman world was built on military power. When Paul speaks of the 'Armour of God', he is speaking metaphorically of course. Misinterpretations of this piece have led to much conflict. In earlier times, Christians have opposed Christians because there are different understandings of the person and nature of Jesus Christ. You all remember the Crusades. Many were killed in the belief that the world needed to be rid of evil, and other horrific slaughters of innocent people throughout history; the list is endless.

So, what is this Armour of God that Paul speaks of - the belt of truth, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation?

Have you noticed that these are all for protection?

This is about bringing the gospel of peace and non-violence. I feel for our troops who have returned and those who have lost their lives in the fight for peace. Does anyone ever really want to take up arms? I think of Desmond Dross, the World War II medic, who refused to take up arms. He saved 75 men in the battle of Okinawa and received the Medal of Honour. Different times, of course.

Paul reminds these oppressed people that the battle is not against another human being, it is a cosmic event. Christ has the victory, he has triumphed. Hard to swallow when you are facing death again, we just can't imagine it.

The only sword is that of the Spirit, the Word of God. It's not about taking the scripture literally but more about words and actions inspired by the Spirit of Christ. People of our time, speaking out and attempting to speak truth into the situation and risking their lives in doing so. The sword of truth, if you want to call it that, is the response of love, peace, mercy and compassion.

St Paul attempts to unmask the powers that cause division. He is trying to promote living in solidarity for the persecuted people of his time. Paul is hoping to equip these Christians for the realities they will face in living their faith. Resisting violence, living in love, forgiveness and gratitude, that's why they will have to stand firm in God, not in human strength. The gospel itself reminds us that the Spirit gives life. I don't think it's about fighting each other at all.

In this country we have more freedom in choosing what to believe and how to respond than many of our brothers and sisters across the world. We can protest, we can speak out, but we are so removed from the situation, what can we do?

St Paul closes his letter with a request for prayer. Pray in the Spirit at all times. I know that you have all been praying for our Afghan brothers and sisters, so maybe we can pray for stability for protection and for peace? I give below the Church in Wales prayer, so join me in praying without ceasing

Love in Christ

Belinda

God in heaven
Your son prayed for the Kingdom come on earth,
So we pray for peace and the safety for all in Afghanistan,
Asking that justice and mercy might become hallmarks of life in that land.
We remember too all from our own shores who have suffered
In the conflict and for the families of all those who have gave their lives
By your Spirit help all people to live in harmony
So that once again Afghanistan can enjoy the peace of security.
In and through your Son,
Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen