

The Armor of Light

Sermon preached at Christ Church
Washington, D.C.
September 6, 2020 / 14th Sunday after Pentecost

by Andrew A. Kryzak

Romans 13:8-14

Matthew 18:15-20

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Many good and faithful Episcopalians of every generation will have recognized the familiar words from St Paul's letter to the Romans this morning. "Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light." This is the source of the Prayer Book's collect for Advent Sunday, the first Sunday in Advent, the start of the church's year, every year, which goes like this:

Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, now and for ever.

Advent, as yet, remains a few months away. It's Labor Day weekend. It's still warm outside; boats are still in the water, and tomatoes are still in season. But Labor Day marks for us the beginning of another kind of calendar in our lives, when the mournful long summer afternoons begin to yield to crisper temperatures, when – even in these reduced circumstances – school begins again and we move back into an autumn routine. It is, therefore, an apt time to think about how, as Christians, we begin again.

Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

This exhortation of Paul's should remind us of the previous chapter of his letter to the Romans, which we heard just two weeks ago. Paul writes, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect."¹ For Paul, the ability of any person – any man, woman, or child – to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, is an extraordinary act. It is something so

¹ Romans 12:1-2

extraordinary, in fact, that it comes only by the power of the Holy Spirit, and it is something that should properly transform us, more and more, into the image and likeness of God in which we were made.

Paul's letter to the Romans, like all of his letters, is an exhortation. In it, he offers instruction, reproof (when needed), and encouragement. The nascent Christian community at Rome witnessed to the gospel in a world that had never heard the name of Christ, and they needed all the help they could get.

We may take it very much for granted, coming to church on a Sunday, if only virtually. We may think it natural that we say our prayers and, perhaps, listen to this sermon. But it should never be far from our consciousness that we live in a secular age. No one would think you at all unusual if you stayed in bed, read the paper, and gave not a single thought to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We have very much more in common with the ancient Christians than we might otherwise think.

To them, and to us, Paul's words this morning tell us something about what it is to live in a secular age – or any age, really, about what it looks like to *put on the armor of light*.

It is a stock theological principle that good works in this world are the irresistible outcome of faith in Christ. We therefore are not only to confess that Jesus is Lord. We are to do more, not because of some arbitrary rule of the church, but because confessing that Jesus is Lord is the first step to along the path of holiness and righteousness, all our days.² To walk that path, Paul writes, every Christian is to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”

For Paul, matters of “the flesh” are not merely or even primarily sexual, as is sometimes assumed. “The flesh” refers to anything and everything which separates humanity from God and from our neighbor. “The flesh” is the whole catalogue of human idols: money, prestige, self-righteousness, power. One does not need to be a Christian to understand the corrosive effects of all of these idols on the human character. They corrode not only because they cause us to look on our fellow men, women, and children as means to an end; they corrode because those idols will use us, chew us up, and spit us out. We become the means to the end; we become something less than human.

It is tempting always to think that the Christian life is primarily defined by its outcomes, and it's easy to understand why that is: charity, kindness, mercy are among the fruits of the spirit, and

² Book of Common Prayer, General Thanksgiving.

they have defined the shape of Christian witness since the earliest days of the church.³ But one can arrive at what appear to be good ends through vicious and divisive means, and so as much as we look for good outcomes, good inputs matter a great deal.

When I was first in divinity school, I went to a cocktail party with my parents. Very much to my surprise, I enjoyed it a great deal. I was troubled by this not because it wasn't a good party, but because I had thought that as a future man of the cloth, my affections should have been reordered in a more pious direction. Should I not have given up a coat and tie for sackcloth and ashes?

When I mentioned this reaction to my parents, they looked at me with the expression reserved for someone who has said something sweet, but misguided and naïve.

"Andrew," my mother said, "nothing is wasted in God's economy. Everything you bring to the table is useful... everything... if you put it rightly into the Lord's service."⁴

That, my friends, is not true merely of the clergy; that is part of the rule of life for all Christians. We do not enjoy our many benefits for ourselves, for our own glory... everything we have is a gift from God, and therefore everything we have is useful to God. Nothing is wasted in God's economy, if we put ourselves rightly into the Lord's service.

To cast away the works of darkness and put upon us the armor of light is to give everything over to God: our intellect, our efforts, our material resources, our hopes and dreams and prayers and thanksgivings – all of it is to be rendered unto God, as is most justly due. That means that we do not use our gifts primarily for our own glory, which is to make idols of those gifts and of ourselves. It means that we face the world with a posture of humility and gratitude. The salvation that dawned in Jesus Christ can dawn in each of us at the moment that God provides, if we prepare the ground within us.

It is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day... and put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

AMEN.

³ Galatians 5:22-23; for an early record of Christian community life, see Aristides, *Apology* 15, in ANF 9:257-259, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Ante-Nicene_Fathers/Volume_IX/Apology_of_Aristides.

⁴ We know as well that the Lord himself enjoyed a good cocktail party. He was not, after all, a Presbyterian.