

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

I Kings 8: (1, 6, 10, 11) 22-30, 41-43; Psalm 84; John 6:56-69; Ephesians 6:10-20 (also 5:21-6:9 is added by this author to the standard lectionary).

I Kings 8:1-43. This passage has to do with the consecration of the Temple to Yahweh that Solomon had built, as the greatest achievement of his reign. Chapter 8 itself deals with the bringing of the Ark of the Covenant from its provisional tent-tabernacle in Jerusalem to the temple for permanent repose. To Israel, the ark was the throne of Yahweh (I Sam. 4:4). Therefore, once it arrives at the Temple, Solomon offers a prayer of dedication (8:22-53) within the context of an elaborate ceremony that establishes the temple as God's throne room where God reigns symbolically over Israel.

There are two primary emphases to Solomon's prayer, and nine specific petitions. The first emphasis (8:22-30) is one of remembering what God has done for Israel. In this portion of his prayer, Solomon recites what God has done and has promised to do through and for David and his heirs, as well as a prayer of dedication of the Temple to God, requesting God to dwell in it, even though "heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built" (8:27). The second emphasis (8:31-53) is that of proclaiming the Temple to be both Israel's center for the worship of God, but also for all peoples (vss. 41-43). It is a prayer for any foreigner who embraces Yahweh: "hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you" (vs. 43). Thus, this prayer of Solomon's and its intent foreshadows the magnificent proclamation of Isaiah (56:7) and Jesus (Mark 11:17), in recognizing that Yahweh is for all the peoples of the earth!

The nine petitions Solomon asks of God as part of this dedicatory ceremony make up the backbone of this prayer. They are as follows:

- 1) for God to continue faithful to his promises to David and his heirs (vv. 25-39);
- 2) for God to judge disputes righteously (vv. 31-32)
- 3) for God to forgive the people when they confess their sins made plain to them by their defeat in war (vv. 33-34)
- 4) for God to forgive the people when they face calamity (vv. 35-36).
- 5) for God to forgive the people when they face natural disasters (vv. 37-40) (the assumption of petitions 3, 4 and 5 is that any defeat, disaster or calamity is due to unconfessed sin on Israel's part);
- 6) for God to make the Temple a house of prayer for all peoples (vv. 41-43)
- 7) for God to grant Israel victory in war (vv. 44-45)
- 8) for restoration of the people when they experience exile (vv. 46-51);
- 9) for God to hear the people's prayer whenever they pray (vv. 52-53).

To truly have perspective on Solomon's building of the Temple, bringing to it the Ark of the Covenant, and leading this dedicatory time of prayer, one must understand what it was that Solomon was really trying to accomplish. And to do that, one must examine the intent of Solomon's reign.

Solomon was Israel's most powerful and richest king, bringing the Israelite empire to its greatest position in the ancient Near East. He reigned in opulent, oriental style. Inheriting the empire of his father, David, Solomon built that empire into one of enormous wealth, beauty and learning; but he built it upon a base of slavery, heavy taxation, and a compromising approach toward the worship of other gods. Under Solomon, Israel had a vast standing army. He built a temple to God, to be the final tabernacle for Yahweh. He rebuilt the city of Jerusalem, including a new luxurious palace. Solomon built whole cities for administration and warfare.

In order to carry on his vast building projects and luxurious lifestyle, Solomon had to expand the financial base of the Israelite empire. He levied oppressive taxes against the Israelites (David had taxed only the conquered provinces), pressed Israelites into slave labor to build his cities, and enslaved other nations to provide free labor. In a most profound sense, Solomon had become the slave-master that the Pharaoh of Egypt had been when Israel rebelled against him. Under Solomon, it became clear that it was easier to take Israel out of Egypt than to take Egypt out of Israel! As a result of his harsh rule, rebellion festered in conquered provinces, and even the Israelites muttered against their king.

There were other significant sources of Solomon's wealth. He controlled all the caravan routes that flowed between Egypt and Mesopotamia, so that caravans coming through Israel's territory paid exorbitant tolls. Solomon was the primary breeder of good horses and builder of chariots that he sold, respectively, to Egypt and Mesopotamia. Finally, Solomon controlled copper smelting for the entire world through his vast smelting furnaces at the Gulf of Aquaba.

Thus Solomon built Israel into a center of wealth and power. But he did so to accumulate power in his own hands. Thus, his policies slowly changed Israel's political culture from the Mosaic emphasis on universal justice to oppressive social policy. And his capacity to make wealth changed Israel's economic culture from one of poverty-eliminating equitable distribution to one of affluence and greed, in which poverty within Israel flourished. His marriages, which were primarily political arrangements with other countries in order to gain power, brought pagan wives into Israel who in turn fostered their worship of Ba'al, and introduced syncretism into Israel's religious life.

But Solomon's most serious offense was his altering of the faith of Israel. When Solomon built the temple to Yahweh, brought the Ark of the Covenant to it, and dedicated it to the worship of God, he set up the conditions by which the worship of Yahweh would be changed from a relational life to be lived into a ritualistic worship to be practiced. He effectively eliminated much of the prophetic element from Israel's faith and its involvement in the political decisions of the nation ("thus says the Lord"), and did so by craftily endorsing and participating in Israel's priestly and liturgical rituals.

If Solomon would have opposed a Mosaic faith that concentrated upon political justice, economic equity and relational faith (as did Ahab, Omri, Rehoboam and Manasseh), he would have received the ire and even rebellion of the people. But instead, what Solomon did was to embrace those liturgical and ritualistic functions of Yahwehism that would turn Yahweh worship into a static, controlled and ritualistically occupied religion – and do so by constantly

proclaiming how much he loved God! Thus, under Solomon, the worship of Yahweh became trapped by a building, a professional priesthood, a liturgy, and a king who wanted to avoid prophetic criticism of his autocratic leadership of Israel.¹

So what was actually going on in the dedicatory ceremony for the Ark of the Covenant in I Kings 8? Actually, it was a highly sophisticated “end-run” around the religious tradition of Israel as practiced under the Sinai Covenant, in that Solomon successfully changed Israel’s understanding of how the Hebrews should practice their faith. By doing so, he had created the conditions that would allow him to seek unbridled wealth and power, enslave both Israelites and the people of conquered provinces, and rule autocratically. And he did this by wrapping himself in the trappings of Israel’s religion, making himself appear righteous rather than the greedy and power-hungry man that he actually was.

Despite the fact that Israel reached its apex in power, wealth and culture under Solomon, he was one of Israel’s worst kings. His actions as emperor were a prelude to the political revolution that would soon split the kingdom and destroy the empire. By institutionalizing the worship of Yahweh, Solomon completely diverted Israel from the covenant with Yahweh; Israel never again successfully implemented that covenant as it did during the period of the Judges and David’s early reign. And Solomon created these deep wounds in Israel for only one purpose – to gain more power and wealth for himself.

Solomon had the greatest opportunity of any Israelite king when he came to Israel’s throne. He began his reign in the spirit of his predecessor, David, and with a genuine prayer for wisdom. But his lust for wealth and power, coupled with his desire to be greater than any other living ruler in the Near East, caused him to make decisions which eventually led to the dissolution of the empire, the severing of Israel into two nations, and the destruction of the dynamic faith of Mosaic Yahwehism. It is no wonder that the biblical writer who summarized Solomon’s reign wrote, “So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of Yahweh, and did not wholly follow Yahweh, as David his father had done” (I Kings 11:6).

Psalm 84 is a hymn of joy in the worship of God in the Temple. Although it is true that Solomon redirected Israel’s worship of Yahweh from social practice to formal liturgy, the fact remains that this redirection resulted in many profound and beautiful pieces of worship, such as many of the psalms. And this hymn is particularly noteworthy, both because of its mystical quality and it having been popularized in Brahms’s *German Requiem* as its central piece. It begins with the haunting words,

“How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God” (84:1-2).

¹ For further development of this understanding of Solomon, see Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), pp. 21-37, as well as George Mendenhall, “The Monarchy”, *Interp* 29, pp. 155-170; Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible*, (NY: Doubleday, 1992) pp. 368-402, L.K. Handy, *The Age of Solomon*, (Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 217-251.

I love the image of a sparrow and a swallow building their nests in the rafters of the Temple, flying in and out and filling the Temple with their song. They are blessed by being in such close proximity to the altar.

“Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praises” (vs. 4).

The psalm speaks of our priorities, suggesting that when our vocation is centered in the service of God (and therefore, of each other) – even when it is a lowly service – it is far better than holding a significant position elsewhere.

“I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness” (vs. 10).

The Psalm then ends by directing our thoughts to the joy that is found when we center our lives in God.

“No good thing does the Lord withhold from those who walk uprightly. O Lord of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you” (vss. 11b-12)!

John 6:56-69 is the conclusion to a profound chapter that sets forth Jesus as the bread of life. The chapter began with Jesus’ miraculous feeding of the 5,000 (in which comparison is made with God’s provision of manna to the Israelites in the wilderness) and his conquering of the elemental chaos symbolized in a storm at sea (see the Gospel commentary for the 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time). Both miracles beg the question, “Who is this man”, suggesting that he is “God-in-the-flesh”, building his alternative community. The 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time then presents the first of seven “I Am” messages, as Jesus answers the question, “Who is this man?” His answer is, “I Am the Bread of Life” (6:35). Jesus states that he is sufficient bread and drink for his community to sustain itself (in fact, for the whole world to be sustained), the new “manna” given by God (vv. 32-34). But the people don’t want Jesus; they want the handouts Jesus provides for them (6:25-34).

The Johannine exposition for the 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time examined more carefully the implications of Jesus’ statements, “I Am the bread of life” (6:35, 48, 51). It was offensive enough to the Judean leaders of Palestine that Jesus called himself “the Bread of Life”. But it was far more offensive that he introduced that claim by stating “I Am” – the two words no Jew was to use, because it veered dangerously close to the sacred name (“Yahweh” or “I Am”). But Jesus’ claim was intentional; John states in 6:35-51 that Jesus is indeed “I Am” – Yahweh-in-the-flesh. This, of course, is the most incredible blasphemy and heresy to the Jews (unless, of course, it is true!). It guarantees the total mortal opposition of the Jewish political, economic and religious leaders to Jesus and makes his execution inevitable.

In the Gospel lesson for the 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Jesus then presents the symbol of the Eucharist as the symbol for himself as bread and drink to his alternative community. The total sufficiency of Jesus for his people, and therefore the world that embraces him, is captured in the celebration of the Eucharist (6:51-58), because it is only in that sacrament that Christ is

profoundly broken and his blood shed for the redemption of the world. Thus, it is that sacrament that connects us to Christ and his all-sufficiency for us.

In Jesus' entire presentation in the sixth chapter of John, as captured in the gospel expositions for the 17th through the 20th Sundays in Ordinary Time, Jesus has managed to offend practically everybody! And now, in John 6:56-69, Jesus pushes the offense to the breaking point. "Does (what I have said) offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe!" (6:61-64)

Jesus' reference to his "ascending to where he was before" is most likely a reference to his coming crucifixion and resurrection. In that light, what he is actually saying is "You are offended at my words and actions? Well, just wait until you see me crucified – and then exalted before God! If you have had a hard time with what I have said, what will be your response when you see me crucified by the Powers of Israel and of Rome?"

In essence, Jesus is saying, "You ain't seen nothing yet! For all you people who believe in me and place your trust in my overthrowing Rome and building a new Jewish Messianic kingdom, how are you going to deal with my execution by Rome? What then? If you haven't left me now, you will certainly leave me by then!"

What Jesus is doing here is separating the "sheep" from the "goats"! And he is accomplishing that through agitation. He is intentionally making people angry and disturbed so that they will look at their own hearts and their own intentions, and decide whether this is the kind of God-in-the-flesh they really want to follow. This is Jesus' challenge to Israel: "choose you this day whom you will serve" (Joshua 24:15).

The inevitable happens. John tells us, "Because of this (that is, what Jesus had said in John 6 and the challenge he had just given them) many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him" (6:66). There were many who had been drawn to and were following Jesus both among the ordinary people and some Pharisees and religious/political leaders as well. But now they began to respond to Jesus' message and method. Some complained (v. 61; see vv. 41, 43), others no longer believed in him (vs. 64), some rejected him (v. 66) and even some betrayed him (vv. 64, 71). Like the rich young ruler, they turned and sadly walked away. Jesus lost most of his followers that day – and that loss was quite intentional on his part.

But not all left him. Peter speaks one of the most poignant lines in the gospel. "So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God"." (6:67-69)

There are those who still confess faith in Jesus (vv. 68-69). And it will be those who will accompany him to the cross (but at a safe distance), and who will be so transformed by his resurrection that they will become the leaders of Jesus' movement to become the bread of life to all humanity.

John 6:56-71 signals a profound turning point in John's gospel, as Jesus moves from popularity to rejection. Many of his followers abandon him here, following the crowd and the establishment. But other disciples, emboldened by Peter's confession of faith, follow Jesus with even more determination. Those who abandon him likely include many within the Jewish power system (pharisees, priests, scribes) who were initially intrigued and even captivated by Jesus, but here start to count the cost of following him. Offended at his claims of oneness with Yahweh (which is even more offensive than his messianic claims), and of the rejection by the very systems that have previously given them position, they now reject him. Power, possessions and prestige end up becoming more important to them than to follow "God-in-the-flesh" as he through his execution and resurrection, becomes the means for the transformation of the world into God's intended shalom community of justice, equity and relationality.

They leave Jesus because he no longer serves their purposes. But for us Christians, "To whom (else) can we go? You have the words of eternal life!"

Ephesians 6:10-20 is, for all practical purposes, the conclusion of the book of Ephesians. Paul concludes this epistle, not with admonitions and instructions as he has in his other letters, but by painting a picture of the church as a warrior, made ready to do battle with the "principalities and powers" of Rome. But before he presents this conclusion, Paul has one more particularly important point to make regarding Christians involvement in public life.

It is regrettable that those who selected the lectionary readings excluded Ephesians 5:21—6:9 from lectionary consideration – particularly since it is the clearest, most practical and concrete instructions from Paul in the Bible as to how Christians are to engage in public life. The passage was likely excluded because of the controversy surrounding it, but doing so in order to avoid debate or controversy is to miss the profound insights Paul has for us in this passage about the church's engagement of the world. So, despite its exclusion by those selecting the lectionary, we will explore it anyway!

Ephesians 5:21—6:9 deals with the three arenas of public life in which Paul believes Christians could be particularly effective in the first century Roman Empire. Those three arenas were marriage, the family and employment. Let's look at all three.

What Paul recommends in each of these arenas has stirred up much debate since the beginning of the 20th century. In marriage, he states that wives should be subject to their husbands while husbands were to love their wives as Christ loved the church (5:21-32). In family life, he argues that children should obey their parents and parents should "not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (6:1-4). Finally, in employment, he states that slaves (and by inference, employees) should obey their masters, while employers should not threaten or bully them, but to treat them in the way Christ treats the employer (6:5-9).

Reactions to these passages in both the 20th and 21st centuries have been severe. Those concerned with the rights of women have bristled at the suggestion that they should be docile and obedient to husbands who should rule the roost. Those concerned with protecting children's rights have taken issue with the implications of Paul's command as a license for an arbitrary

paternal leadership that could lead to the abuse of children. And unions protecting the rights of their members have resisted the suggestion that employees should become virtual slaves of their employers, obeying them in all things as they are used by those employers as production units rather than human beings.

But a careful examination of the text leads us to recognize that Paul taught none of the above. Rather, it is the way Paul has been interpreted down through the ages that strengthened the hands of systems of domination from emperor to husband, pope to parent, or tycoon to employer.

Those who avoid Ephesians 5:21-6:9 on the grounds that Paul was a “male chauvinist pig” are guilty of breaking the primary principle of biblical exegesis. That principle is: “The Bible wasn’t written to you. It was written to the people who originally received it, and must be read within their context!”

Simply put, Ephesians wasn’t written primarily to you. In fact, Paul could never envision you would ever exist! It was written to first century Jews and Gentiles who, within the context of the Roman Empire, had embraced Jesus Christ as their savior and Lord. So when we read it, we have to do so understanding the Roman and Jewish worlds of the first century in order to clearly understand the context in which Paul is writing and the conditions with which he is dealing. And that is particularly true of marriage, family and employment in the first century Roman Empire!

What were marriage, family life and employment like in the first century Roman Empire, both in Gentile portions of the empire and in Jewish portions? What were the rules, expectations, mores and laws regarding these three primary institutions of society in the first century? Let’s look at them.

Marriage. In the Roman culture of Paul’s day, marriage was instituted as a contractual relationship between the proposed groom and the bride’s father. Marriage was not based on love. Rather it was primarily a business arrangement (in fact, often the couple had never met). If love developed at all between husband and wife, that was an unexpected serendipity; it was an unanticipated bonus. Most of what the poets of the day wrote about love was sexual relationships that occurred for the husband or wife *outside* marriage (that was one of the principle functions of the Roman baths). Essentially, marriage was a contract between the groom and the bride’s father, an ongoing economic liaison that would benefit both families as economic entities. Neither the bride nor the bride’s mother had anything to say about whether this marriage should occur. Therefore – plain and simple – in Roman culture, the bride was perceived as chattel, owned formerly by her father and now “sold” to her husband. Consequently, in the marriage relationship, the husband was in total legal and economic dominance.

Family. Because the wife was property, so was the child. Between father and child, the father held all the legal power while the child had no rights whatsoever. This even included adult children. If the adult child (whether married or unmarried) lived in the family compound (and one was expected to do so), he was under the authority of the senior father – the “papa” or (in Latin) the “pope”. As Caesar was the “papa” or “pope” of the empire, so each male head of the extended family was “Caesar” or “papa” to that family.

Work. Between slave and owner, the owner had complete control over the slave (including life-and-death). The slave had no legal prerogatives at all. The owner had no obligation to reimburse the slave for his labors, but he did have the obligation of providing housing, food and clothing for him – but how well he did that was each owner’s personal decision. If one were a freedman or peasant (that is, an employee) as opposed to being a slave, the employer had full control over that employee in his work life. The only obligation of the employer was to reimburse the employee in the terms with which the two of them had agreed upon the beginning of employment (cf. Matt. 20:1-16 demonstrates this understanding of employment), but he had no obligation to house, feed or clothe him. Thus, often, an employed freedman was, in reality, economically worse off than were many slaves.

That was the world in which Paul lived. Now, what did it mean to act like a Christian in such a world? And what did that have to do with one’s engagement, as a Christian, in public life?

What Paul was doing in all three instances was requiring of the legally powerless party (wife, children, slave, employee) *nothing more than what the law required*. But on the other hand, what Paul was requiring of the party that held all the power (husband, parent, owner, employer) were *actions and attitudes that far exceeded the law and which were consistent with the formation of a relational (i.e., Christian) culture!*

Thus, husbands were instructed to “love their wives as they love themselves”. Fathers were instructed “not to provoke your children to anger”. Owners and employers were instructed to perceive their role with their slaves or employees as a service of them, recognizing that they too are children of God, for “you have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality”. Paul requires of the powerless only what the law requires – but of the powerful, Paul requires far more than the law’s requirements of them. He requires love of the husbands (something Roman society didn’t even expect), respect and fairness toward their children on the part of fathers, and fairness and equity toward workers on the part of owners and employers.

In other words, what Paul is requiring in this passage is a *redistribution of power!* He is requiring a changing of the power-relationships between those Christians holding power and those who have no power, so that those who have power treat the others with love and respect. Paul is, in reality, increasing the power of the powerless and reducing the power of the powerful, so that they can no longer act unilaterally.

I suspect that in the churches when this portion of Ephesians was read out loud to the congregation, there was a collective shock – an in taking of breath, as the implications of what Paul had written sank upon the people. Then, I suspect that those who were relatively powerless in the congregation looked at each other with conspiratorial smiles while those who were powerful sat there stunned and not knowing how to respond! And why? Simply because Paul is “laying the axe at the root of the (Empire’s) tree” (cf. Luke 3:9)!

So, was Paul a “male, chauvinist pig”? Quite to the contrary. He was a radical – one who was seeking the radical transformation of three of the most basic Roman and Jewish institutions. And the advice he gave here in Ephesians, embraced and followed by the church, brought about a

significant transformation over a 300-year period in the institutions of marriage, family and work!

What Paul was essentially trying to accomplish by this advice was to *undertake a radical intervention by the Church in those Roman systems Christians would have the most realistic opportunity to shape*. The one institution of public life that Paul did not advise involvement was the political arena of the Roman Empire. Why not?

In that portion of Ephesians in which Paul gives his most specific instructions to the church about its engagement in public life (5:1-6:9), he is silent about Christians being involved in politics. That is so simply because direct involvement in politics was not an option open to the Christians of the 1st or 2nd centuries. It is an option for us, but not for them. In the Rome of Paul's day, no commoner – not even a Roman citizen like Paul – could participate in the political arena. Only Roman nobility and military commanders could participate. And according to Paul, in the Christian Church “not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth” (I Cor. 1:26), because they were primarily slaves, freedmen and peasants.

So Paul does not recommend that Christians do what they cannot do. Rather, he stresses their involvement as Christians in Roman life where those Christians could have the greatest opportunity to make a direct impact – and that would be in marriage, the home and the economy. What Paul is advocating here is the very pragmatic position that Christians should make a difference where they are, with what they have at hand. The 1st-century Christians were to begin the process of working for the radical change of the Roman systems into Godly systems by starting with those places where they had the greatest power and leverage. And *that* was the most practical exercise of political reality!

Ephesians 6:10-23. Now, Paul draws his epistle to a close. And he does so in a most dramatic way.

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” (Eph. 6:10-17)

Paul now brings to a close this, his “last will and testament” to all of his churches throughout the Roman Empire, soon to be bereft of his leadership and on their own before a hostile and aggressive Rome. He had begun this letter reminding them what they were up against in Rome, but also reminding them Who they had on their side and Who was, consequently, fighting along with them.

Here, Paul returns to this theme once again. But he does so by painting an amazing picture – a picture of a Roman warrior preparing for conflict against an overwhelming enemy. The order in which Paul presents his metaphor of the church arming itself for battle against Rome is the order in which soldiers would put on their armor for battle. They would clap on the breastplate with a wide and strong belt, followed by armored shoes (not just sandals) that would protect their feet, then they would take up their shield, place their helmet that protected not only their head but their necks as well, and then would take up the short, powerful Roman sword designed for close-in, hand-to-hand combat. So Christians preparing to battle the “powers” of the Empire, would clap on God’s protective righteousness and truth, protect their feet with the gospel of shalom, hold the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit in order to do battle. In other words, Christian “soldiers” engaging Roman power would be protected by God’s self in every way. For they would not go into this battle alone!

But who would it be that they would be fighting? Who would the Christians be up against? It would not only be Rome itself. The nature of their struggle is far more profound than that, Paul suggests. The church, in its effort to bring about the transformation of the world, is not simply up against the political, economic and religious power of Rome (which would be formidable enough). They are up against the interior spirituality of Rome, the “cosmic powers of this present darkness”, the “spiritual forces of evil” that come out of hell and which have invaded and now possess Rome. They would not simply be up against a Rome possessed by the powers of darkness. They would be up against the Possessor of the darkness – even Satan himself!

In the light of such a formidable foe, what are God’s people to do? Paul gives two answers – both of which are right. What Paul is seeking to make clear to the church, coming out of both his keen political intuition and his spiritual discernment, is that the struggle is not solely with Rome as the church seeks to intervene through the gospel in Rome’s politics, economics, family structure and culture. The battle is with the demonic that has permeated all Roman institutions! The task is engagement in spiritual warfare with the demonic spirituality of the empire – the spiritual forces that drive the empire and give it its power.

Therefore, the church has to “suit up” with God’s armor to carry the battle to the foe. It isn’t enough to be Godly politicians, businessmen, couples and parents in an ungodly world. You have to be equipped for spiritual warfare – because that is what you are actually going to be engaged in! But how can one be adequately equipped for such spiritual warfare? Paul then moves on to his second answer.

“Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak” (6:18-20).

The greatest weapon that the Christians have to battle the evil of Rome and to work for its spiritual transformation is not their armor or shield or helmet or short sword. It is their knees! It is prayer. Only by bathing their entire war against “principalities and powers” in prayer does the church have any hope of winning against such a formidable foe.

But to be effective as prayer-warriors, that prayer must be constant (vs. 18a). It must be intense (vs. 18b). And it must be unselfish (vss. 19-20). That is, it must be directed not towards your own petty worries and concerns (“God bless my spouse, my family, my parents, my dog”). Rather, prayer must be directed towards those (like Paul) who are on the front lines of battle, and must be centered on praying though to victory all those engaged with the enemy.

Thomas Merton, the great Christian mystic in the third quarter of the 20th century, was sarcastically challenged by an atheist who had served in the American military on the front lines in Europe, “And what did you do for the cause of the war, Brother Thomas?” Merton replied, “I and my Trappist brothers spent the entire war on our knees in prayer for Allied victory. We prayed in shifts so that there was never a minute, from the beginning of the war until its conclusion, when we were not in prayer. Who knows whether your victory was made possible because of those prayers?”

Paul then draws the magnificent encyclical of Ephesians to a close with a commissioning of the church to the overwhelming task given it by God (6:23-24). As the Christians faithfully assume their task of working for the transformation of the Roman Empire, so that it might one day bow the knee to Jesus, may God give them peace, love, faith and grace to undertake this seemingly impossible vocation. Thus ends the most politically and theologically perceptive book in the New Testament canon.

In I Corinthians 4:20, Paul wrote, “For the kingdom of God depends not on talk but on power”. In Ephesians, we see Paul systematically presenting what that single sentence in I Corinthians is all about.

The Church is not to be about “talk” – maintaining a privatized faith simply building up interiorized congregations and only sallying forth into the world to “talk up” the faith and to make converts. This would have been the obvious “path of least resistance” for the church in a first century world whose public life was hostile to Christianity. But Paul knew that such insulation would lead to the marginalization and, eventually, the disintegration and destruction of the church.

Instead of taking the obvious way out, what Paul did in his own ministry and what he urged upon all his congregations through the book of Ephesians was to work for the kingdom of God in human society. He called the church to move out into public life, living a profoundly different and compassionate life-style than the rest of society and working together for the transformation of that society’s politics, economics and culture into at least an approximation of the kingdom of God.

That was what Paul sought to do while he was alive. Once he was dead, through this book of Ephesians, Paul charged the church to be about that same ministry. The church of the remainder of the 1st and the 2nd centuries was precisely about the conversion of Rome. And we – what about us? What are we Christians about in the Romes of the 21st century? .