

The heart of worship



4. A Passion for Battle (Psalm 46, Acts 16:16-34)

When we were last on holiday in France we visited an area in the east of the country near to the town of Laon. We stayed on a caravan site on a reservoir called the Lac d'Ailette which had its own artificial beach. One day it was so hot we decided to go and be cultural and look around somewhere.

Near the lake was the Abbey of Vauclair. That seemed cultural enough and we set out in search of it. We arrived to find that the abbey was just a messy ruin but on walking around the place we found the walls were riddled with bullet holes. It soon came apparent that the abbey was intact until 1914 when the area became the front line in the First World War. The abbey was in a good vantage point and it changed hands frequently between the French and Germans. All around the site, the French had left the craters left by the artillery explosions as well as the abbey as a reminder to generations of the sacrifice that had been made for their freedom. Nearby there were military cemeteries and we visited a British one - the Yorkshire Regiment as far as I recall. There were hundreds of tombstones all neatly regimented and immaculately kept.

It was all a poignant reminder of the horrors of war. I looked at the map of the front that extended from the Belgian coast to Switzerland - a long band where the whole landscape had been destroyed - trees, houses, fields, towns and villages - by artillery and constant fighting. It was the final resting place for millions of men.

It's quite clear as we look back in history, young men in 1914 were lured by the excitement of war and there was no problem enlisting them. But it began to become difficult. I'm sure you've seen this poster before.



In the end it was necessary to conscript men. Why? Because the horrors of the trenches made men less willing to enlist to go up to the front. The romance of war had gone and the country had to rely on conscription to get the men it needed for the trenches.

And as we consider that great conflict, we don't find it surprising that morale was a problem. The trenches were a place of death. Death by gas, death by artillery, death by bullets, death by exposure. Morale in a conflict that seemed never ending was difficult. You can imagine what it was like in 1918 as the Allies gained the upper hand and an end was in sight.

In an army morale is an important thing. If the soldiers believe in the cause they are fighting for, are volunteers and are sure that they will have victory, the greater the morale and the more effective the fighting force. A demoralised army is quickly defeated.

Time and again we have drawn the analogy that the Christian life is a battle. When we accepted Christ we entered a war that had already been won at Calvary. We have entered in at a late stage. If you remember back to our series on Ephesians earlier in the year we had that encouragement to put on the full armour of God. I said this about the battle we are in:

When we accepted Christ we ceased to be civilians, lost without Christ and have entered into the battle. It's a battle that commenced early in the history of creation and will end when Christ returns victorious.

Actually the battle is already won on Calvary, but the enemy still needs to be subdued and his territory occupied because he has not surrendered. You may win the battle, but some enemies do not lie down but show resistance and guerrilla tactics.

Do you realise that you are in a battle? Whether you like it or not, you're in the middle of a war. There are no non-combatants or pacifists in God's kingdom. We are called to kit up and stand.

You may think I'm out of order on a Remembrance Sunday to compare our conflict as believers to fighting in the great human conflicts of the last century. Compared to the horrors of the trenches, our comfortable life in Swaffham isn't quite the same thing is it?

The think on this. At the moment thousands of people in Swaffham are going to a lost eternity. They either do not know the gospel or have rejected it. They're lost. But we have the words of life. Why don't they know - because generations of Christians here and elsewhere were not prepared to put their head above the parapet, to put on the full armour of God and oppose satan and extend the kingdom of God. This isn't a fairy tale. This is real life. Heaven is real, Hell is real and each day people slip into a lost eternity. And the consequences are eternal. Today in France, in Vauclair the battle is over and the area is one of rolling landscapes and wooded glades. The War there was four years long and the effect on the land was temporary. But the consequences of being lost are eternal and horrific.

The reality is that there is a war . And where are God's people? Too often stuck in their trenches.

What sort of warrior are you? We are on the winning side but so often our morale would suggest that we are on the losing one. Sometimes life just doesn't seem to be a victory does it? Maybe our problems are personal ones - problems with relationships

in our families and amongst our friends. Problems in the workplace. Problems with our neighbours. Problems with our health. Or maybe just a personal spiritual crisis. Or on a church level, too busy concerned with our affairs or just fighting amongst ourselves on petty theological issues.

We hear numerous encouragements to stand for Christ and be His witnesses. But somehow it isn't happening for us. yet we are all called to put on that armour, do the battle and extend His kingdom by rescuing those that are lost - because that's what we are called to do - rescue the lost!

I always say when preaching in this kind of subject, that we should see how the men and women of God acted in scripture. Just take a look for a minute at these verses:

2 Cor 1: 8 We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia . We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. 9 Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. 10 He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, 11 as you help us by your prayers.

This is relating the problems Paul had at Ephesus. Things happened there that made him to despair even of life. If that's how you feel sometimes then it's a real comfort to know that you are in good company because it's a problem that is felt by ALL the people of God. And the solution is the same too!

Why? Because the victory is in Christ and it has already been won. Next Sunday evening I'm going to focus on the fact that "greater is He that is in us than he that is in the world". Because that's true. The victory is won, but so often we live in defeat. How did Paul deal with it?

He relied on God verse 9 *But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.* And what did he and Silas do in Philippi? They worshipped. *Acts 16: 25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.*

They prayed and sang hymns. In fact there was good scriptural precedent for it as we have already read in Psalm 46 this morning: *God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. 2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, 3 though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.* It's a psalm of praise! People sing it when they were in trouble. In fact, it isn't the only one - I had a wide choice to pick from this morning and you got Psalm 46.

Why praise God when we are in such a dire situation? To get things into context. To remember that we are the children of God and what we are going through is nothing the hell that we have been saved from.

Romans 5: 7 Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. 8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!

And to remind us that in the battles of life, God wants us to recognise Him and find victory. As Paul and Silas sang and recognised who God was and who they were, then things happened and lives were changed.

This morning we are here because of a Saviour who has changed our lives and we are here to serve Him in a ministry of changing lives here in Swaffham and in the

surrounding villages. And that is not an easy task. We have already found opposition with many of the things we have been involved in as we seek to share the Good News. Do we despair? No we praise God who will have the victory in changed lives.

So why is worship important even in the thick of battle

▶ Because we have something to praise God about

61:1 The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, 2 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, 3 and provide for those who grieve in Zion-- to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.

These are words about Jesus. We need to put on a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. We have much to praise God for so let's put it into perspective.

▶ Because God is our refuge and strength and is our ever-present help

If you are a believer this morning, you are a son or daughter of the living God and have the Holy Spirit. God is always with you. Remember that this morning and praise Him.

▶ Because the victory is His already

Remember the walls of Jericho. What did the Israelites do? They marched around preceded by the ark of the covenant and people playing music and singing. And what happened? They did little except watch God knock those walls down.

What about the story of King Jehoshaphat who was attacked by the armies of Moab and Mount Seir. How was he told to deal with the situation?

2 Chron 20: 20 Early in the morning they left for the Desert of Tekoa. As they set out, Jehoshaphat stood and said, "Listen to me, Judah and people of Jerusalem! Have faith in the LORD your God and you will be upheld; have faith in his prophets and you will be successful." 21 After consulting the people, Jehoshaphat appointed men to sing to the LORD and to praise him for the splendour of his holiness as they went out at the head of the army, saying: "Give thanks to the LORD, for his love endures forever." 22 As they began to sing and praise, the LORD set ambushes against the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir who were invading Judah, and they were defeated

Or what of Paul and Silas? They prayed and sang because their situation was already in hand. God dealt with it.

I've a little experience of this in evangelism because this is one way in which we enter into battle as a church. One street mission we had in London involved having groups singing God's praises. Not only did it make an impact on passers by, it was also a focus of prayer and praise for those talking to passers by. If they praised in scripture, don't be afraid at worshipping being a part of our ministry to non-Christians. I shall be dealing with this in the next part of this series in two weeks time.

Are you feeling low this morning? Think the devil has the upper hand? The best medicine is to worship. To come before God in prayer and singing. To recognise the battle is His and trust Him alone because the victory is His.

Father

**As we come before you in our weakness this morning
We thank You that the victory has already been won in Christ
We give You the glory and the praise because greater is He who is in us than he who is
in the world.
Give us Your peace and a desire to praise You for what You have done for us
And all the things which You are going to do in our lives and in Your church.**

In Jesus Name

Amen.



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