

This morning's epistle reading contains a lot of military language. It refers to enemies, cosmic powers, shields, breast plates, and arrows. Conjuring up a picture of spiritual warfare in which the followers of Christ are to venture forth as warriors for Christ or batten down the hatches to withstand the pending attack.

Much of the passage is taken up with descriptions of the armour the Ephesians were to employ either for their defence or to equip them for their foray into the world to proclaim the gospel. In fact the bulk of the passage is about withstanding attack rather than going on the offensive.

It is a mindset many in today's church easily fall into. We can become so used to receiving negative publicity about what some have done, and being criticised - even ridiculed for our beliefs; that we can feel under threat.

The tendency then is that we retreat into our shells; circle the wagons (as the saying goes) and

prepare to hold onto what we have. When we do that; we can find ourselves defending things that have long lost relevance for many in our society.

Another flight response is for us to abandon the communal space. To not engage with society at any level. We do that by re-prioritizing our lives so there is no time to do the things we don't want to do.

The fight response can be manifested in our attacking all manner of people and things in our society. We perceive there to be threats where there is no threat and hostility where nothing of the sort is contemplated.

Saturday a week ago a number of parishioners gathered here to reflect on what this community of St Paul's means to them. For some this building was special. It was said that there is a sense of coming home and of being close to God in here.

What I find exciting and I think we should celebrate is the fact that people felt love to be evident here in the St Paul's community. And that they saw that love overflowing into the community.

It was also felt that here at St Paul's we have a special position in the heart of the city. And that St Paul's has the capacity to build on its role as the city church with a capability to host community events and activities.

When people were invited to think about the future of St Paul's; a more contemporary service, a Baptism Pastoral team, a parish visiting team, greater participation in the life and work of Mothers' Union, Worship and study were all mentioned.

Featuring highly was the hope that St Paul's could have a greater involvement with children, teenagers, and young adults. And that we could try and get more involvement with WestMAC

College. Another hope was that St Paul's could develop a ministry at the university and with young married people.

In relation to the sort of person you want as your next rector it was suggested that you want a priest with leadership and people skills who can lead you to be people who will show 'Christ' to others by your thoughts, words and actions.

What a vision.

Our time of reflection was followed with a consultation with Bishop Cameron Venables last Sunday. In his opening remarks the bishop reflected on the recent Provincial Clergy Conference. One of the insights he gained was that clergy are effectively leaders of mission and that this was a role most were not trained to fulfil.

The Bishop said that there were two tsunamis impacting on the life of the church. The age demographic and the digital tsunami. He made

the point that if the church is to engage with a population raised in the digital age that the Parish Web site was and would become an even more important ministry tool.

He suggested that prospective parish clergy would examine the parish profile on the parish web site, and check out the web sites of other organizations in and around Ipswich before deciding to apply for the position of Rector here.

He also made the point that young people expect to have the order of service projected onto a screen. He was supportive of the hope that the parish might develop a ministry to the University.

The tone of our time together Saturday a week ago and last Sunday with Bishop Cameron was positive and outward looking. There were many expressions of the love of God experienced in the lives of parishioners and a desire to share that with others.

Had our thinking been influenced by fear it may well have involved us thinking how to circle the wagons and protect what we have. We might have thought about how can we preserve the status quo and continue to do what we have always done. Resisting any suggestion that the future might look different in any way shape or form.

Fear might also have lead us to want to attack those we perceive to be threatening us; our belief or our church. It could lead us to be critical of people from different faith groups, different denominations, or even those within the parish who hold a different understanding of the faith, or who might wish to do things in ways we don't.

Rather than being influenced by fear it seems to me that your thinking is being influenced by love and I find that exciting. You are considering developing partnership with many people and organizations in Ipswich. Inviting others to join us

in worship and service, sharing our giftedness and inviting others to share their giftedness with us.

It will be important that as a community we carefully and prayerfully consider what you have had to say individually and collectively. You will find a summary of the two events from last weekend in the pew sheet.

Parish Council thought about all 34 hopes and dreams you have for St Paul's at its meeting on Tuesday night. You will be able to read about the outcome of that thinking in next week's pew sheet.

In this morning's gospel story Jesus spoke about people eating his flesh, drinking his blood and abiding in him. There are many ways of understanding this.

I don't think for a minute that Jesus was speaking about people physically eating his human flesh. Those who heard Bishop Cameron preach last

week would have heard him make that same point.

I do think that Jesus was referring to the disciples drawing on his teaching, his presence, his memory and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to sustain them as they proclaimed the good news.

When parish council reflected on the 34 hopes and dreams that emerged last weekend the one that most commended itself to them was the desire for St Paul's to have, "more; small groups and or bible study groups".

It is in small groups and bible study groups that people are able to feed on Jesus' teaching, draw on His presence and experience the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. That is not to suggest for a moment that those things are not possible in our Sunday worship or can't happen elsewhere.

It is simply to state that it is well known that faith communities with active small group ministries are

communities where growth in faith and in numbers is known to occur.

Last weekend many articulated that they experienced love within this community and saw that love extended to others. Parish council felt that the desire to have, “more; small groups and or bible study groups” ranked above all the other hopes and dreams for St Paul's.

The military language in the letter to the Ephesians conjures up images of spiritual warfare and reminds us how easily we can think of our church or faith community being under attack and retreat into our shells or strike out lest we be struck. By abiding in Jesus we avoid the need to be either defensive or offensive.

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