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ANTHONY ESOLEN

MAGDALEN COLLEGE
OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

Song of the day:

Soldiers of Christ, Arise

When I browse through the terrific *Hymnal 1940* of the Episcopal Church, I count around fifty hymns that have to do with *fighting for Christ*. I doubt that anybody of the time, if asked to draw a picture of the essential warrior, would have thought of an Episcopalian choir director. Yet at least in this regard those churchmen paid attention to the fighting words of the gospels and the New Testament. It was not Mohammed but Saint Paul who wrote to the church at Ephesus, urging his brothers to “put on the full armor of God,” because we are in a battle the like of which the world does not recognize. We fight against principalities and powers, against the rulers of darkness, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

Need I say that if that's the battle, you aren't going to win it with a smiley face and a picture of Jesus playing patty-cake?

So Saint Paul repeats what he has said: Put on the *full armor* of God. The word in Greek is *PANOPLIA* (pan-o-PLÉE-ah), which became our English *PANOPLY*. It doesn't mean a full set of decorations. It refers to *ALL* (Greek *PAN*) the weapons and the armor that would fit

you out to be a *HOPLITES* (hop-LEE-tays), a foot soldier at the front, fighting alongside your fellows. So you'd better have then the sword of the Spirit, the helmet of salvation, and the shield of faith. You must gird up your loins with truth – no saggy trousers now. Your feet must be ready to move fast, shod with the good news of

peace. And your chest and heart and all the powerful midsection of your body must be armed with the *THORAX* of righteousness: the *BREASTPLATE*. Paul isn't indulging himself in pretty pictures here. Don't let anybody fool you. This is war.

I turn to one of the most popular contemporary hymnals, *Glory 'n' Praise*, and see whole sections marked off for “Comfort,” “Peace,” and “Love.” Far be it from me to grouse about comfort, peace, and love. They are at the heart of the gospel. But I don't see anything about striving, fighting, and suffering, those

things that in this world are indispensable if we are going effectively to bring comfort, peace, and love to other people. All the hymns with fight in them have been sent to the editor's office to sit in a corner and be quiet. There are three exceptions. Two have been kept so as to be sung on a special feast, because there isn't anything else that will serve: *Lift High the Cross*



(The Exaltation of the Cross) and *For All the Saints* (All Saints' Day). The third is *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* (for the fourth of July). Every other fighting song has been banished.

Here is a real song for fighters, written by Charles Wesley. Its words and spirit come straight from Saint Paul, seen in the light of the whole gospel and the call of the Christian life:

*Soldiers of Christ, arise,
And put your armor on,
Strong in the strength which God supplies
Through his eternal Son.*

You can't sing this song to the march Silver Street as if you were Maria in *West Side Story*, feeling pretty. There is nothing here about how pretty you are or how good you are. We are strong in the strength of God, or else we are not strong at all, not for the battle that Mr. Wesley has in mind:

*Strong in the Lord of hosts,
And in his mighty power;
Who in the strength of Jesus trusts
Is more than conqueror.*

That's four uses of *strong* and *strength* in a few short lines. And Wesley has brought in a verse from Romans too: "In all these things," says Paul, referring to the trials that the faithful Christian will have to undergo, nakedness, famine, and being led like sheep to the slaughter, "we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (8:39). We may forget what the phrase "the Lord of hosts" means, because we say the words so often in prayer and are too used to them. The hosts are the angels, mustered and arrayed as armies. (That young general you see there, motioning to

the others with his arm, is Michael the archangel.) If we trust in the strength of Jesus our victor, we will be numbered among those hosts, doing good work in the battle before us.

Many a sloppy sentimental song at church is meant to make us feel good in an easy way: we sing about how wonderful we are. This fight song is not like that. God's strength is all:

*Stand then in his great might,
With all his strength endued,
And take, to arm you for the fight,
The panoply of God.*

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That is tremendous. We are to *stand*, not run away. We are *endued* with the strength of Christ: that means, literally, that we have it on our backs and shoulders. We are robed in it.

The next verse picks up a hint from Psalm 84, a song of the glories of the house of God on Mount Sion, and the living power of those

who go up there to dwell:

*From strength to strength go on,
Wrestle, and fight, and pray:
Tread all the powers of darkness down
And win the well-fought day.*

"I have fought the good fight," says Saint Paul to Timothy as he looks forward to his martyrdom. We are to fight that same fight against the powers of darkness. For God wants sons, not slaves, and that means also sons who fight, not mere babies, and not skinny and cringing servants who can't or won't do anything bold on behalf of their master.

We fight for Christ, but it's ourselves whom we build up in the fight, through his grace:

*That, having all things done,
And all your conflicts past,
Ye may o'ercome, through Christ alone,
And stand complete at last.*

We are complete in Christ, says Saint Paul (Colossians 2:10), because he is the head of every authority and power. We must be raised to grow to the full stature of Christ. Otherwise we are nothing.

You can go to Mass for fifty years in most parishes and never hear a hymn like this one. Why not?



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