



Sunday
August 25th, 2024

Pentecost 14B

Bread of Heaven

Breaking Open the Word

**Pentecost 14
Liturgical Year B**



**St Peter's by the Lake
PAYNESVILLE**

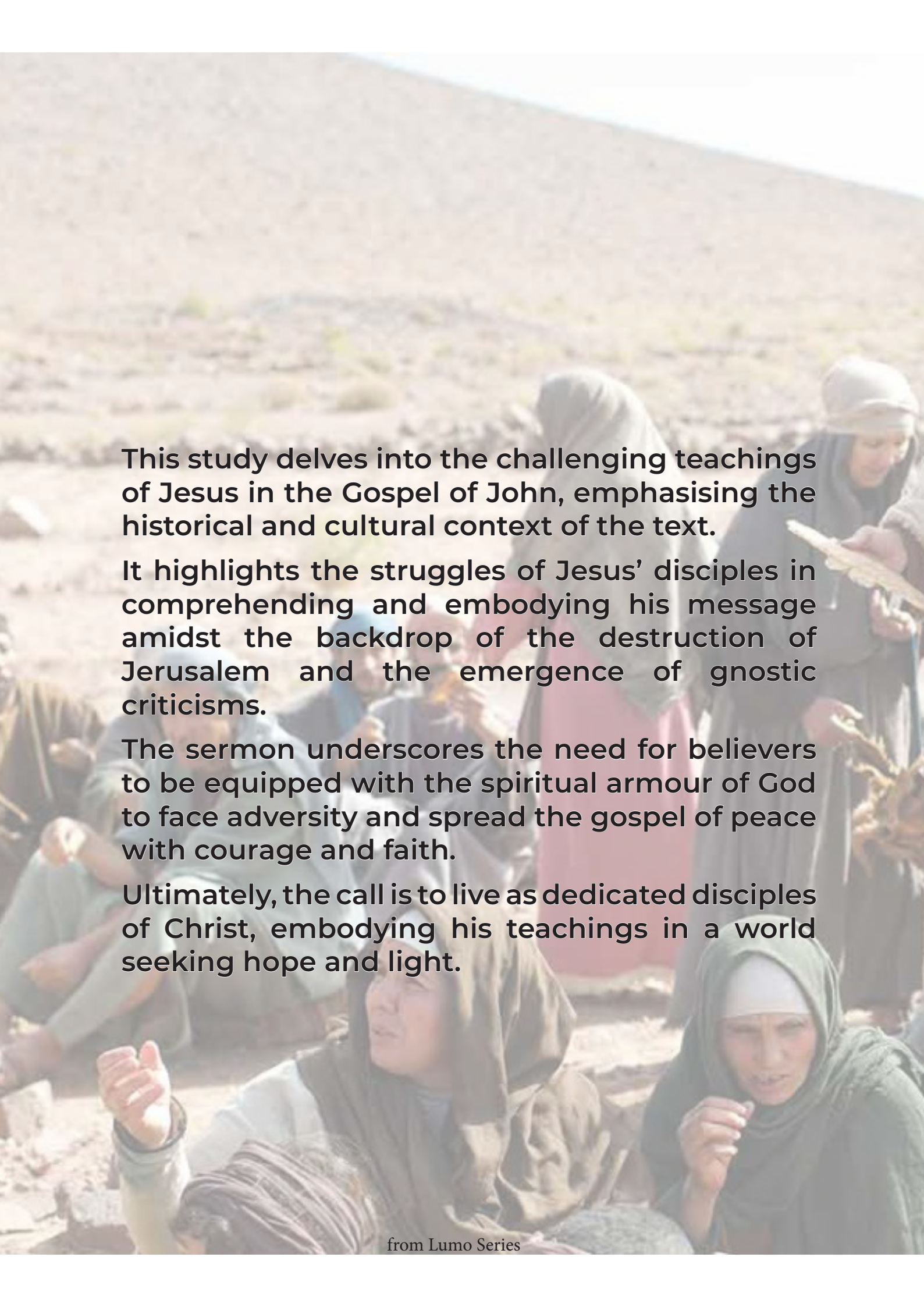
Anglican Diocese of
Gippsland



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This study delves into the challenging teachings of Jesus in the Gospel of John, emphasising the historical and cultural context of the text.

It highlights the struggles of Jesus' disciples in comprehending and embodying his message amidst the backdrop of the destruction of Jerusalem and the emergence of gnostic criticisms.

The sermon underscores the need for believers to be equipped with the spiritual armour of God to face adversity and spread the gospel of peace with courage and faith.

Ultimately, the call is to live as dedicated disciples of Christ, embodying his teachings in a world seeking hope and light.

READINGS

Joshua 24.1-2a, 14-18
Psalm 34.15-22
Ephesians 6.10-20
John 6.56-69



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“

Put on the helmet of
salvation.

”

Ephesians 6

Almighty and merciful God,
of whose only gift it cometh
that thy faithful people
do unto thee
true and laudable service;
Grant, we beseech thee,
that we may so faithfully
serve thee in this life,
that we fail not finally to
attain
thy heavenly promises;
through the merits
of Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

INTRODUCTION

In his sermon “Bread of Heaven”, Dennis delves into the complexities of Jesus’ teachings within the Gospel of John, emphasising early followers’ difficulties in understanding these teachings. These teachings are woven into the historical backdrop of post-Jerusalem destruction, which left the Jewish people feeling bereft and lost. Dennis outlines the challenges disciples faced during their time under the Roman Empire, explaining that discipleship required a practical commitment to Jesus’ teachings, not just idolising them.

The sermon also addresses the emergence of gnostic ideology, viewed as heretical by the early church, which posited that understanding Jesus required a particular knowledge or gift. Understanding this, the sermon introduces imagery within the Gospel that symbolises Jesus’ sacrifice and resurrection. It emphasises the importance of the ritual sharing of bread and wine, creating direct links between the people and their Creator.

At the same time, it acknowledges the difficulties some followers faced in accepting this symbolic service, preferring to continue worship and strict adherence to existing laws.

Drawing parallels with the reading from Ephesians 6, Dennis urges the believers to stand their ground, using the spiritual

armour analogue to indicate the need for solid faith, truth, righteousness, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit.

Dennis concludes the sermon by urging the believers to adopt the word of God in their lives as disciples of Christ. He stresses the need for courage, sacrifice, and the spread of love in a world that increasingly seems fraught with despair. Since discipleship requires an active commitment, Dennis motivates his congregation by reminding them that God accompanies them always.

He emphasises faith as the believers’ shield against any spiritual assaults they might encounter, assuring them of their status as soldiers of Christ.

This sermon, therefore, gives an in-depth understanding of the hurdles faced by the early followers of Jesus and encourages contemporary believers to adopt his teachings actively in their lives.

The message that resonates throughout is the importance of not just understanding but living as Christ’s disciples, strengthening their bonds with faith, and spreading peace in a world engulfed in darkness.

Key Reflection Points

- Reflect on the challenges faced by Jesus’ followers in understanding his teachings and pray for wisdom and clarity in applying them to your life.
- Ask God to help you live as a disciple of Christ, putting on the whole armour of God and standing firm in faith and righteousness.
- Pray for courage and strength to embrace new ways that benefit salvation and spread love in a world filled with darkness, trusting that the Lord is with you and not being afraid.

God of Creation, breathe into us, made of clay,
your gift of life so that we, made in your image
may be your eyes, ears, hands and voice.



Ephesians 6

¹³ Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness.

¹⁵ As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Today's gospel exploration of John 6 concludes with acknowledging that the teaching over the past six weeks has been difficult for people to accept. Given the nature of the language and the development of the story of Passover, provision, and acceptance, it is not a surprise that the God who provides is now 'enfleshed' and 'dwelling' among us.

Those gathering at Capernaum have moved from wanting more for their bellies, wanting to make Jesus their king, not understanding and rejecting Jesus, murmuring, then outright disputing, and now desertion. Jesus' teaching is too complicated and beyond reasonable regarding the teaching of the Torah and the books of Moses.

As another side point to see what is happening in the community, this Gospel teaching is being read to a community that has experienced incredible upheaval. It is widely accepted that the Gospel of John was written after the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70. Not one stone was left unturned. The Temple was raised to the ground. Now that the place of ritual sacrifice was gone, the community of John, both Jews and Gentile, had lost one of the most significant possessions they had. To completely demoralise the Israelis, Rome made sure that destroying the temple, as Jesus warned, would leave them empty and lost in terms of their worship.

It is fitting that today's reading, set at the time of the Passover, is being heard in a synagogue away from Jerusalem. At the time of the writing of John's gospel, the Torah had once again become the central point of focus for the Israelis, once again in dispersion. All they had left were the scrolls of law and the Levitical Code. They would cling to that tradition, something that Rome could not take away from them.

As much as this tells of Jesus's teachings, it is also a lesson to those living beyond Jesus's time. To be a disciple of Jesus was going to be just as hard in the Roman Empire as it was for the people of Israel. Many would fall away because the ritual of remembering Jesus and giving "flesh" to the law, that is, "living it, not worshipping it," was too difficult.

Again, the imagery in the Gospel is directed at a community already aware that Jesus' ascending onto the cross is now historical and his rising again from the dead a reality. Each person is aware of Jesus' command to remember his reign from the cross through the ritual sharing of broken bread and an ordinary cup of wine, which symbolises the enfleshed chosen of God recreating our bonds with our creator.

A common criticism of this knowledge led some people to find it all too hard, and some claimed that understanding required a special gift or charism called knowledge. The group that espoused that view became known as gnostics and was condemned by the early church as heretical.

As for the disciples who remained, their understanding of the teaching of Jesus was that they were drawn to the presence of God and the promise of eternal life. Peter's confession says: You are of God. This relationship with Peter and Jesus would be tested a few more times, but essentially, he was beginning to understand and fully believe. We're also told that the one who would betray Jesus was in the remaining group. Jesus gave them a choice: stay with



me or go. Peter affirms that they had no choice but to stay.

Jesus also asks whether the people deserting him would understand if they saw Jesus ascend to heaven like the great prophets of the past. Would it be easier for them if he was gathered in the chariots of fire or ascending bodily into heaven? It was easier to go back and worship the text and laws as God's gift and keep that safe.

At the beginning of the gospel of John, we are told, "...and the word became flesh and dwelt among us." We are also told that even though "darkness did not comprehend it." Those who refused the enfleshed word of God remain in the dark, unable to believe. "But to those who believe, they have received, grace upon grace." John's gospel is making that very real and clear to the community. To be drawn into the living flesh of Jesus or giving life to God's word requires a sacrifice, not of physical bread or wine, but of our heart, mind, soul and strength.

This is one reason I love the pairing of Ephesians 6 with this part of the Gospel. Later, as members of the "church militant here on earth," you will have a chance to sing your hearts out based on those beautiful words about becoming soldiers of Christ.

What is it to be a soldier? In this case, it is not so much a war between people or notions but a war that gives life, light and hope to those seeking the peace of God that passes all understanding. Again, we hear the phrase "that evil day" and understand that as being the time when the wicked who have turned away will receive their judgement. For the faithful, we are to protect ourselves in the enfleshing of the word of God, living it, breathing it, doing it.



Paul, having been arrested so often and even writing this letter to the community in Ephesus, was probably very familiar with the Roman army uniform. As Paul redefines what we are asked to put on, consider your favourite gladiator film or Cecil B DeMille's favourite movie.

"Stand firm." Be at attention. Be still. Listen to the orders, and be prepared for what follows.

¹⁴ Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness."

One of the words that Australians know well is gird yourself. Surround yourself with the truth that it is the Word made flesh. The breastplate of righteousness is to be one

with God and on the side of doing what is required of the Lord. And what is needed?

¹⁵ “As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.”

The word gospel is significant. The Good News of Peace. This is the peace of God that passes all understanding.

¹⁶ “With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you can quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”

Enflesh the word of God in our daily lives. With all that we do, with all that we are, and all that we believe, live as disciples of Christ. Fight the good fight. Finish the race. Keep the faith.

And that requires courage and some level of sacrifice to enter into new ways that benefit our salvation and the spread of love in a world longing for hope and dwelling in darkness.

Soldiers of Christ, stand easy and take heart; the Lord is with you. Do not be afraid.

The text from the Gospel of John, specifically John 6:56-6:69, contains several key Greek words that yield profound insights and would significantly strengthen your sermon. Centred on the theme of Jesus as the ‘Bread of Life’, these verses contain crucial dialogue between Jesus and his disciples. Here are the key Greek words from these verses:

1. Μένει (Menei) - Abide

The word ‘Μένει’ appears in John 6:56 which is often translated as ‘abide’ or ‘dwell’. In this context, it speaks of a deep, abiding relationship between Christ and the believer. The concept of ‘abiding in Christ’ is a central theme in Johannine literature and this would be an important idea to delve into for your sermon.

2. Σάρξ (Sarx) - Flesh

Seen in John 6:56 and 6:63, ‘Σάρξ’ is translated as ‘flesh’. It ties back to Jesus’ statement about eating his flesh for eternal life, a metaphor for accepting and internalizing his teachings. Digging into this symbol may help explain the scandalized reactions of some disciples.

3. Πνευμα (Pneuma) - Spirit

Πνευμα, translated as ‘Spirit’, appears in John 6:63. The Spirit is what gives life, contrasting the flesh which profits nothing. This dichotomy between flesh and spirit, the physical versus the spiritual, could be a rich seam to mine in your sermon.

4. Ζωή (Zōē) - Life

In John 6:68, Peter exclaims that Jesus has the words of eternal life (Ζωή). The word exudes an aspect of ‘quality of life’ beyond mere physical existence. The specific mention of ‘eternal life’ can be an interesting point to expand upon, discussing the quality of life that Jesus promises.

5. ῥήματα (Rhēmata) - Words

This appears in John 6:68 when Peter states, “You have the words of eternal life”. The Greek word used here highlights the importance and power of Jesus’ teachings, equating them to the source of eternal life. Exploring this concept would reinforce the importance of studying and adhering to the Word of God.



GROUP DISCUSSION

Question 1

What challenges faced the listeners of Jesus' teachings, and how do they relate to challenges we face today in understanding the Bible?

Dennis described various challenges people had in comprehending Jesus' teachings, and some began to doubt and dispute his message.

In your daily life, how do you overcome such challenges to better understand and embrace Jesus' teachings?

Question 2

How does the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem relate to the Jewish people's reliance on the scriptures and the teachings of Jesus?

Dennis mentioned the destruction of the Temple and its impact on Jewish people, who then relied more on the scrolls of the law and Levitical Code as a connection to their faith.

How has your faith been influenced by how you rely on the Bible and other spiritual teachings under challenging times?

Question 3

Why was the concept of 'gnosis' or special knowledge condemned by the early church, and what can we learn from this regarding understanding Jesus' teachings?

Dennis referred to the criticism that understanding Jesus' teachings required a special gift or knowledge, which led to the emergence of a group called gnostics and was condemned as heretical.

How can you build a deeper understanding of the Gospel without getting sidetracked by concepts that are misleading or divergent from the core teachings?

Question 4

What does Ephesians 6 teach us about putting on the whole armour of God, and how can you apply this in your life?

Dennis connected the sermon to Ephesians 6, where Apostle Paul encourages believers to put on the whole armour of God (truth, righteousness, faith, salvation, and the word of God) and stand firm.

In what ways can you actively put on the armour of God in your own life, and how has it shown a transformative effect?

Question 5

How does the ritual sharing of bread and wine symbolise Jesus' sacrifice, and what can we learn about deepening our relationship with God?

Dennis spoke about the symbolism in the Gospel: the sharing of bread and wine represents the enfleshed chosen people of God, recreating their bonds with their Creator.

How do you personally connect with God while sharing communion, and how is your faith strengthened by embracing this symbolism?

End notes and further reading

N.T. Wright, **Paul for Everyone, Ephesians**, Westminster John Knox Press

Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of John

Sacra Pagina

Author Francis Maloney

Publisher Liturgical Press, 2016

Pray...

- Let's start by sharing any prayer requests we have for today.
- Ask God to help us apply the principles of wisdom and prudence in our decisions this week.
- Pray for the strength to serve and worship God with a humble heart.
- Seek guidance in using our power and influence wisely for the good of our community.



Brabarlung Totem
This is produced on
Gunaikurnai Land, and our
respects are paid to the First
Nations people everywhere.



Now we approach Spring

This five-day devotional will be taking a deeper dive into the sermon from this weekend.

We'll explore themes of faith, resilience, and living out God's word in our daily lives, guided by the teachings from Ephesians 6 and John 6.

Day 1 Ephesians 6:13-14

In today's devotional, we are reminded to "stand firm" and equip ourselves with the "belt of truth" and the "breastplate of righteousness." These elements signify the importance of grounding ourselves in God's truth and living a life that reflects His righteousness. As the sermon emphasised, being a disciple of Christ involves embodying His teachings in our everyday actions and decisions.

As Paul wrote to the Ephesians, he highlighted the necessity of spiritual readiness. By putting on God's armour, we can withstand the challenges and temptations that come our way.

Let us use this time to commit to living out God's word with integrity and strength.

How can you practice embodying God's truth in your daily life?

In what ways can you ensure that your actions reflect righteousness?

What challenges do you face that require spiritual armour to overcome?

- Pray for the strength to stand firm in your faith.
- Ask God for guidance in living out hallowed truth and righteousness.

Day 2 Ephesians 6:15

The second day of our devotional focuses on being ready to "proclaim the gospel of peace." The sermon connected this with the Good News of Jesus, who embodies peace that surpasses all understanding. Our readiness to share this peace is pivotal in our spiritual journey and witness to others.

Consider the context of the early Christians, who faced significant upheaval and persecution. Despite this, they clung to their faith and continued proclaiming the gospel.

Today, we are encouraged to follow their example and be prepared to share God's peace with those around us, no matter the circumstances.

Do you feel prepared to share the gospel of peace with others? Why or why not?

What steps can you take to deepen your understanding of the gospel?

When have you experienced God's peace in your life?

- Pray for opportunities to share God's peace with others.
- Ask God to fill your heart with His peace, enabling you to become a living testimony of divine love.

Day 3 Ephesians 6:16

On Day 3, we delve into the "shield of faith," which helps us quench the "flaming arrows of the evil one." Faith is our defence against doubt, fear, and temptation. Pastor's message reminds us that living out this faith daily is a testament to our commitment to God and His promises.

Holding up the shield of faith means trusting God's protection and guidance, even when facing adversity.

Reflect on your current trials and how God has equipped you to overcome them through faith. Embrace the assurance that with faith, you can face any challenge.

How has your faith protected you in challenging times?

What can you do to strengthen your "shield of faith"?

What areas of your life do you need to trust God more fully?

- Thank God for the gift of faith that shields you.
- Pray for increased faith in times of doubt and difficulty.

Day 4 Ephesians 6:17

The fourth day focuses on the “helmet of salvation” and the “sword of the Spirit.” The sermon highlighted that salvation protects our minds and hearts, assuring us of our identity in Christ. The “sword of the Spirit,” which is the word of God, equips us in spiritual battles.

Understanding and meditating on Scripture fortifies us against spiritual attacks. The helmet of salvation signifies our secured future with God, while the sword empowers us to proclaim God’s truth. Let us immerse ourselves in His word and remain confident in our salvation.

How does the assurance of salvation influence your daily life?

What steps are you taking to deepen your understanding of God’s word?

How can you use Scripture to overcome spiritual battles?

- Pray for a deeper understanding of your salvation in Christ.
- Ask God to help you wield His word effectively in your life.

Day 5 Ephesians 6:18

The final day of our devotional examines prayer and alertness in the Spirit. The sermon emphasised the importance of prayer as a constant, powerful tool in our spiritual arsenal.

Paul’s exhortation to “pray in the Spirit on all occasions” reminds us to stay vigilant and connected to God.

Prayer aligns our hearts with God’s will and strengthens our spiritual resolve.

Through prayer, we maintain our focus, seek guidance, and find strength.

Let us commit to being prayerful individuals, continuously seeking God’s presence and wisdom.

How often do you engage in prayer throughout your day?

What can you do to improve your prayer life?

In what specific areas do you feel the need for prayer support?

- Pray for a more consistent and heartfelt prayer life.
- Ask God to help you stay alert and connected to His Spirit.

Prepared by Rev’d Dennis Webster, Rector of the Anglican Parish of Paynesville, Diocese of Gippsland for personal or small group use.

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