

Will the real Christians please stand?

(Joshua 24^{1-2a,14-18}; Psalm 34^{15-end}); Ephesians 6¹⁰⁻²⁰; John 6⁵⁶⁻⁶⁹)

*And having done everything stand firm.
[Eph 6¹³]*

You could be forgiven for thinking in both the readings we have had today that things weren't going too well for the Christian faith!

From the **Gospel**:

- ✦ Jesus had just told people that, unlike the dealings with God in the past where things had to be repeated, the **bread** that he was offering was enough.
- ✦ The **spirit and life** in his words meant that forgiveness was a one-off thing with no need to keep going back to the Temple to have the most recent sin forgiven. Can you comprehend how big a revolution this is?
- ✦ The result of this was that many of those who heard this were **offended and turned back and no longer went about with him**. Fascinating that those who left weren't followers but went about with him!
- ✦ Jesus then asked the disciples **Do you also wish to go away?** It is then Simon Peter that is left to respond in great words of confidence and faith: **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.**

This is a great moment - the disciples had taken a stand: this is what they know to be true; Jesus was the one on whom they placed their hope and their trust.

From the **Epistle**:

- ✦ Paul is facing a very challenging situation. He is in Rome and under arrest. He is chained to his guards and isn't going anywhere. Eventually he will be beheaded in 67CE as a Christian martyr.
- ✦ He is probably talking to himself when he tells us 4 times that we have to **stand**.
- ✦ Historically, Christians had been persecuted since 64CE when the Emperor Nero blamed Christians for the fire that destroyed Rome. This was the beginnings of a difficult time - with Christians being killed, some by being used as toys for hungry lions in the Colosseum in Rome, or being crucified in their thousands.

Would we stand or would we be tempted to give up?

✦ It is then almost ironic that Paul uses the guard to whom he is chained as a visual aid of what a Christian needs to stand firm:

- **The Belt of Truth:** the belt served to stop the tunic getting in the way and was used to hang the sword from. The truth stops us getting tangled up and allows us to stand on the certainties of faith.
- **The Breastplate of Righteousness:** The breastplate covered the vulnerable organs. Words are no defence against accusations, but a good life is. Righteousness is the legal status of being declared innocent - and that is what God gives us - but we do need to live up to it.
- **The Shoes of the Gospel of Peace:** Shoes were the single thing that allowed the Roman army to conquer Europe. The Christian message of peace with God is more powerful and needs sharing.
- **The Shield of Faith:** This was the long oblong shield designed to put out the flaming arrows that were lethal in 1st century combat. When faced with the flaming arrows that could disable us - when life goes wrong; when we are tempted; when we are tested - faith is the one thing that changes things. Faith lets us know that God is in charge and that God will always give us the strength to get through.
- **The Helmet of Salvation:** The soldier put all these items on himself, but then, because the arms were through the shield, the helmet had to be given. Salvation is something that God gives and something that we have to receive.
- **The Sword of the Spirit:** The sword is the weapon of attack and defence. To the Christian the Bible is just that - it isn't what we think but what God says that makes a difference. It is important that we read, know and understand the Bible so that we can use it effectively.

✦ Paul then gets to the Christian secret weapon - **prayer!** He knows that to face his death he will need the prayers of all Christian people: twice he uses the word **bold** so that he uses the opportunity he will have positively.

✦ When we pray we need to stand with those who still face such trials - for Christians in Syria and Iran. Prayer needs to be constant, intense and unselfish to be Christian.

Christians need to stand and be counted!

Christians need to stand firm.