

St Patrick's breastplate.

The deeper challenges of intercessory prayer.

Jim Smith

What is happening to our world? As I write this, in 2011, there have been earthquakes in Chile and New Zealand, the earthquake and Tsunami in Japan, Tunisia, Egypt and Libya in turmoil, oil prices becoming very challenging and the Euro is rocking. Many of us are asking "What will happen next?"

In my book "Where are the lamps?" I have shared what I think is happening in Europe. I believe we are facing a shaking the like of which we have not seen for centuries. Since writing that, the shaking appears to be spreading ever wider. What is needed in these days are people who will pray. I started sharing the "lamps" with just this in mind. But now I see that there is a deeper and harder level of intercession to which some must come. I found the challenge to such intercessors in St Patrick's breastplate, an old Irish hymn. I thought this would be an easy study. The words are lovely, and I thought a few paragraphs would do the job. But the breastplate gripped me, and the Lord began to expose the challenges which it encompassed.

This material, written for the first lamps gathering in Uckfield in March 2011, is the result. It's not an understatement to say that the laser printer had hardly stopped turning when I stood up to share it.

St Patrick's breastplate

**I bind unto myself today
The strong Name of the Trinity,
By invocation of the same
The Three in One and One in Three.**

**I bind this today to me forever
By power of faith, Christ's incarnation;
His baptism in Jordan river,
His death on Cross for my salvation;
His bursting from the spiced tomb,
His riding up the heavenly way,
His coming at the day of doom
I bind unto myself today.**

**I bind unto myself the power
Of the great love of cherubim;
The sweet 'Well done' in judgment hour,
The service of the seraphim,
Confessors' faith, Apostles' word,
The Patriarchs' prayers, the prophets' scrolls,
All good deeds done unto the Lord
And purity of virgin souls.**

**I bind unto myself today
The virtues of the star lit heaven,
The glorious sun's life giving ray,
The whiteness of the moon at even,
The flashing of the lightning free,
The whirling wind's tempestuous shocks,**

**The stable earth, the deep salt sea
Around the old eternal rocks.**

**I bind unto myself today
The power of God to hold and lead,
His eye to watch, His might to stay,
His ear to hearken to my need.
The wisdom of my God to teach,
His hand to guide, His shield to ward;**

**The word of God to give me speech,
His heavenly host to be my guard.**

**Against the demon snares of sin,
The vice that gives temptation force,
The natural lusts that war within,
The hostile men that mar my course;
Or few or many, far or nigh,
In every place and in all hours,
Against their fierce hostility
I bind to me these holy powers.**

**Against all Satan's spells and wiles,
Against false words of heresy,
Against the knowledge that defiles,
Against the heart's idolatry,
Against the wizard's evil craft,
Against the death wound and the burning,
The choking wave, the poisoned shaft,
Protect me, Christ, till Thy returning.**

**Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.**

**I bind unto myself the Name,
The strong Name of the Trinity,
By invocation of the same,
The Three in One and One in Three.
By Whom all nature hath creation,
Eternal Father, Spirit, Word:
Praise to the Lord of my salvation,
Salvation is of Christ the Lord.**

I bind unto myself today The strong Name of the Trinity,

“Dear Jim, thank you for your teaching about the breastplate. It was so challenging, that I had a very troubled night thinking and evaluating the consequences of what you had said.” A sobering warning from an intercessor who first encountered this teaching at a meeting I led in East Sussex. The challenge begins straight away. The challenge to “bind” ourselves not to doctrine, not to programmes and not to the church, good though all these may be. We are challenged to bind ourselves to the personality of God - his total personality.

We so often call on the name of the Lord, (Acts 2:21) but the breastplate asks us to bind on the Trinity, and this should alert us to the fact that what is to follow is going to be profound and hard to handle. The Trinity is, in doctrinal terms, easy to explain:-

- * “Father”. Father is the Creator, (Gk: “Pantokrator”. Rev.4:8) and “Almighty.” (Heb: “Yahweh Sabaoth”.)
- * “Son”. Jesus is the Saviour (Gk “sotar”): Redeemer (Heb: “gaal” - to redeem by payment).
- * “Spirit”. Spirit is “Ruah” (Heb: “Ruwach” wind, breath): “Counsellor,” (Gk “paraklete”): “Empowerer” (John 14:25: Romans 8:11).

The doctrine is fine, but we are not binding ourselves to words, but to the totality of God, and all his power. This is awesome power to bind ourselves to. It is the power that creates, the power that resurrects, the power that sustains, the power which equips and the power which will bring all things to an end. This is the power which we are being asked to bind ourselves to, before we even begin our breastplate journey to the depth of intercession. We are, in pictorial terms, strapping ourselves to a nuclear bomb!

We can reject such a binding, but then we have to ask ourselves “How are we going to drive back the tide of evil which is engulfing our planet?” I have children and grandchildren. Do I want them to live in a terror stricken environment, without fuel, food and freedom? For this is surely the intention of our enemy, who is a destroyer. (Rev.9:11) Only prayer can drive back the darkness, and release the power of the spirit which might lead to the return of Jesus. And only intercession at a desperately deep, dangerous and even life

threatening level can drive back the tide. The situation has gone too far for easy solutions. God is calling for men and women to “bind” themselves to him, to all of him, so that we can be equipped to fight.

I need to say this now - the breastplate is dangerous and very perceptive. We cannot be allowed to get away with saying “yes” without an awareness of the consequences. Archbishop William Temple said “The nearer to God I get, the more of a sinner I feel.” If we want to bind on the Trinity, and begin this journey, then as we get closer to God, as we will certainly will, our hidden sins and faults will be exposed - love for the world (Demas: 2 Tim 4:10): secret sins (Woman. John 8: 1-11): avarice (Ananias and Sapphira. Acts 5): religious spirit (“We have Abraham.” John 8:33): evil: (Burning artefacts. Acts 19). This is painful, but it’s not the end of the process.

God is holy and pure, and we will have to be willing to become more holy and more pure to walk this way. (Heb: Holy - “Qodesh”. Zech. 14:20) Over and over again we will have to change, be cleansed and be challenged. We have to reflect his holiness. I have found that being holy as he is holy has been a very uncomfortable process. It separates me from much of the world, and makes me feel very isolated and alone. We live among an unholy people (Isa.6:5) and we are dancing to a different tune. It’s not an easy line to hold.

By invocation of the same The Three in One and One in Three.

Now we know what we are calling on and we must note how we are calling. We are “invoking”. This is a dangerous word, as it draws us closer to God and his power. When the 7 sons of Sceva invoked the name, they were destroyed. (Acts 19:13-16) If we are going to invoke, then we are calling on the Trinity in a way which implies our total commitment to the Name. There can be no gaps in the wall – no area which we are not prepared to open to the Lord - and a willingness to serve.

But if we are willing to make such a commitment, even with the caveat “Lord I believe, help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24), then huge power is made available for our protection. The very core of the spiritual world is our defence. This is very challenging for any Christians who think that all the protection they need is that of Ephesians 6. We are entering a greater battle, and need greater power and protection.

Binding ourselves to the Trinity will expose all our fallacies, sinfulness and impurity. But if we are willing for that to happen, we can enter Gethsemane with courage. And it is in Gethsemane that we are called on to fight in these dark days.

Having chosen to bind ourselves to the Trinity, we are led into the challenges of the life of Jesus - birth, death, resurrection, ascension and judgment. Each step of the way calls for more and more from us. Why we need to face and accept such challenges will become plain later in the breastplate.

I bind this today to me forever

By power of faith, Christ's incarnation;

We are often blinded from seeing the awesome power in these lines because Christmas has become so overwhelmingly babyish.

But the incarnation is dynamite. It implies that we stand with the predictions of Isaiah, (Isa.7:14) the predictions of Micah (Micah 5:2) and the overshadowing of Mary. (Luke 1:35) In Luke we read that she experienced the "overshadowing of the Holy Spirit." (Gk: "Episkaizo" "to throw a shadow upon, to envelop in a shadow, to overshadow") The Shekinah cloud, seen at the giving of the commandments, (Exodus 20:21) and the transfiguration of Jesus (Mark 9:7) was going to cover Mary. It will cover us, and we will have to have the same commitment and courage which she had to receive.

The incarnation was a part of a process - Jesus leaving his glory (Philippians 2:7-8) and returning to it at the appropriate time. (John 14: 1-4) By binding this theology to ourselves, we are nailing our colours to the mast. We confess the incarnation, and by this we are setting ourselves in opposition to the unbelieving world, and exposing ourselves to the power of the enemy. Forget "gentle Jesus meek and mild." Welcome fiery darts!

His baptism in Jordan river

What was the baptism of Jesus? He said that it was to "fulfil all righteousness." (Matthew 3:15) This carries implications. Only a sinless person could do such a thing, so we are identifying ourselves with the theology that Jesus was without sin (1 Peter 2:22) and that he had come to be the lamb of God. (John 1:29)

Let's pause for a moment. The breastplate is drawing us ever more closely to Jesus. The challenges are coming thick and fast. Perhaps we have, as a church,

failed to teach these challenges, which give focus to our intercession. It is comparatively easy to come to Jesus, but really tough to stand with him, and to stay with him as he draws us ever more deeply into the spiritual battle. We are not just fighting for ourselves, but for our Nation, for Europe and possibly the world. It's a tough battle ground and it demands acceptance of an awesome level of challenge and commitment. Failure to face and accept these challenges rules us out of the heart of the battle, and it is in the heart of the battle that we truly become more like Jesus.

It's strange how so many have held on to the breastplate because they like the words. But as it reveals its theology, perhaps it won't be so popular among those who want an easy, quiet or prosperous life. But to those who are deeply troubled by the shaking which is coming on the world, it holds out the prospect of being allowed into the innermost areas of battle. Like Gideon's men, those who stay the course see the victory. But it is seldom very many who will stay God's course.

His death on Cross for my salvation;

Here we reach one of the focal points of the breastplate. If we have been accepting the challenges as they have come, then we are prepared for this. But what is the theological meaning of "his death on the cross?" We must not let ourselves be one dimensional here, or we will miss a great deal of the power. The cross is a 3D theology.

* **In my place:** His death is a substitute for us. The classic statement is Isaiah 53:1-6. The theology of justification, such a key element in the New Testament, flows in part from these verses. Jesus died in our place, took our punishment, and paid the penalty for our sin. Alleluia!

* **Ransomed:** This is such a precious concept. In the N.T., it is the Greek word "lutroo" which means to have the ransom paid for us. Our "kidnappers" are paid off. We are free, and can never be kidnapped again. (Mark 10:45)

* **The sacrifice:** In the O.T., the spotless lamb was used to atone for the sins of the people. (Lev.4:35) Jesus is the lamb of God, (John 1:29) (Hebrews 9:11-16) who will atone for all the sin of the world.

* **Christos Victor:** Jesus has broken all the hold of the enemy over us. (Hebs.2:14-15). Legion, Jairus, Lazarus - all testify to the failure of the enemy to resist the power of Jesus.

Nice theology, but this is St Patrick's breastplate, and as we are seeing it doesn't do "nice" theology! The challenge here isn't to believe the theology, but to live it - to live the crucified lifestyle. (Galatians 6:14). And if we live this lifestyle, we can expect nothing less than to feel the pains of the crucifixion - the sin and brokenness of the world. We have to take all this brokenness into our spirits, feel it and lift it high to the cross. We become bearers of the failures of the world. Their brokenness is manifest in us, and we feel "crucified." Ouch! Are we prepared to bind ourselves to this?

His bursting from the spicèd tomb,

Having reached the cross, and faced the challenges, this is pure joy. Christ is risen, and it's good to absorb this truth, before the breastplate plunges into the dark world of the enemy. I've conducted hundreds of funerals in my ministerial career, and there is a huge difference between the funeral of a Christian and any other funeral. We have trusted. We have fought the fight, often against ridicule and strong opposition. We have won. As we push ever deeper into the battle, we will need to return to the resurrection again and again. It gives us courage.

His riding up the heavenly way,

The ascension doesn't get a lot of prominence in the Church, because we look at it from the earthly point of view. God's people spend far too much time thinking and viewing things from an earthly perspective. Yet what is our three score and ten against the eternity we will spend in the spiritual world?

From the spiritual point of view, the Ascension is a rocket! All creation sees that the battle is won, and the Saviour is returning to the place he left. The spiritual beings see it and rejoice. Imagine the frisson of excitement which went round heaven. "He is back!" "He has done it!" And imagine the disturbance in the realms of the enemy. The same words, but spoken with the bitterness of defeat - "He is back!" "He has done it", and then "we have lost."

We have to absorb both sets of responses if we are to continue to explore and experience the breastplate – not easy for our human minds to do.

His coming at the day of doom

This just continues the victory of the Ascension. He will return, because judgment is in his hands. We have to take hold of this truth, as we face the

fight which is now, and which is coming. In the middle of the darkness, this is the light which shines on us. Jesus is the victor. Jesus will return again, and everyone will know the truth about him. In this dark age, the scoffers are everywhere. But it is they and not us who are playing the most dangerous game in the world – risking the loss of the soul. Even owning the whole world cannot put this disaster right. We are not working in an infinite situation. The end will come – and Christ will be exalted.

I bind unto myself today.

We were challenged to bind ourselves to the Trinity, and now out of that Trinity the breastplate calls us to bind ourselves specifically to Jesus, the one who took on our form. (Phil 2:7) We must walk his walk, so that his light can shine from us into the situations we are facing. Like so much else, this calls for an act of will on our part. We live in a nation and church which has lost sight of this kind of tough willingness. We have grown soft and unable to make such a commitment - or it is seen rarely. That's why the enemy advances so strongly. He sees the weakness of discipline, commitment and sacrifice. We have become the church of easy believism. Few are willing to put on St. Patrick's breastplate, to the enemy's rejoicing and our shame.

But "putting on Christ" at the level demanded here is very hard for us. It calls for a decision to enter the sacrificial and the suffering side of faith, and genuinely suffer. It's a privilege to be called to such a position - but few accept it.

The challenges we have faced so far are for our equipping. Now, from the spiritual kingdom, the breastplate shows us our protections. But as usual they come with challenges.

I bind unto myself the power Of the great love of cherubim;

Where do we go from here? The preparatory challenges and commitments are over. We now enter the spiritual realm, to see what is available for our defence, to see what we are up against, and what we are expected to do. Some of the images are not easy for us to understand.

Cherubim and Seraphim are found in Ezekiel and Isaiah, as well as Revelation 4. Our theological conclusion about them is that they are a higher "order" of

angels, whose job is not to serve us, but to serve the Lord. They worship him, love and honour him. They are with him always.

The breastplate is challenging us to match the love for the Father which the angelic beings have. Why? The heart of the victory of Jesus over the enemy was not might, but the Lord's love for the Father, which overflowed into a loving desire to set us free. Within this love, all things became, and become, possible. The enemy cannot overwhelm this love. It is too strong for him. He cannot begin to understand the source of it, because there is only anger and revenge in him.

The breastplate rightly points out that there is protection in this kind of pure selfless love. We, in our human state, will not be able to achieve it, but we can aspire to it and in that process, power surrounds us.

It's difficult to grasp this, because it comes from heaven not from earth, and speaks to our spirits, not our minds and bodies. Look at it in this way: - the cherubim and seraphim have managed it, and we are the pinnacle of God's creation. So if they can do it, by the working of the Spirit, so can we.

Is it worth it? Why not just stay with 1 Corinthians 13 and leave it at that? The answer is simple. Those who enter the terrible battle of these days need more than 1 Corinthians 13, more than loving our fellow creatures, more than selfless acts of generous love. We need the power of heavenly love surrounding us and filling us. This will challenge the enemy, and keep him in his place, while we try to fulfil the challenges which face the world. It was the power of this love which broke the enemy. The breastplate is not commanding us to love the Cherubim, but to see that in their love for the Father is to be found great protection for ourselves.

And what is the protection? To keep our eyes fixed on the Lord, and to absorb into ourselves the love which he has for his Father. The enemy is always trying to make us look at the wind and the waves. But the Cherubim and Seraphim keep their eyes fixed on the Lord within the power of love. We must do the same.

The sweet 'Well done' in judgment hour,

An encouragement comes next. We will not lose eternally. Our names are in the little book of life, and we will not face the great white throne. But let's not forget the subsequent judgment on our lives - the gold, silver, wood or stone

judgment. (1 Corinthians 3: 12-15) If we do not take on the challenges of the breastplate, we will never rise to be serious intercessors. But if we try to skip the challenges, or weaken them, then there will come a day when we have to explain that as well. We will, of course, not be risking our heavenly position, but we do well to remember that as we, perhaps, try to skip the challenges we have faced so far, the Lord will ask us to explain our behaviour later.

The service of the seraphim,

The Seraphim do serve us: - “Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.” (Isa.6.5-7)

We know that all angels are there in part to serve us, and it appears that even from within the heart of those angels dedicated to the Lord, we are able to receive encouragement. Don't understand it? Nor do most of us, but if there is help to be had, let's take it.

Confessors' faith, Apostles' word,

* Confessor's faith

Here is Apostle Paul, writing when he expected to be martyred:-

“For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”(2 Tim 4:6-8)

There's a rugged determination in his attitude here. It doesn't flow from a “whistling in the dark” mentality, but in an utter conviction in the promises and purposes of God. It's an unyielding faith, and this is what the breastplate demands. We need an unyielding, unbending, rugged determined faith, which counts death as nothing more than another step towards the ultimate victory of the cross. Only the Holy Spirit can bring this faith to us, but we have got to desire it. In these days, it is rare to find people with such faith. The comfort of riches has weakened us. Now, when the Lord needs it, he cannot find it. This has serious consequences for us.

*** Apostles word**

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” (Acts 2:42)

Most of us do this already - or do we? It seems to me that many in the church have a “supermarket” mentality to the Apostles word. They pick out what they like and add it to the basket, but ignore those things that look too hard or too painful. When we devote ourselves to the Apostles word, we devote ourselves to all of it. If we do not we leave chinks in our armour, which the enemy will exploit

The Patriarchs’ prayers, the prophets’ scrolls,

We need a full faith - which is based on the Old Covenant as well as that which is in the New. We need to draw on the lessons of the Patriarchs and prophets, as well as Apostles and Martyrs. Some Christians, following a very old heresy, (Marcion) reject the Old Testament. Those who are facing the onslaught of the enemy would never make such a mistake.

All good deeds done unto the Lord

“The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’(Matt 25:40)

Any good thing done for and in the service of the Lord strengthens the Kingdom, and consequently strengthens us in the battle.

And purity of virgin souls.

Here’s another real crunch point in the breastplate - and as usual, so easily passed over. Fundamentally, those who fight have to seek after holiness, and be pure. In fact, a greater purity and holiness is probably demanded of those who take on the deeper fight. We have to be holy. (Isaiah 6: Revelation 4:)

This means that we have to separate ourselves from evil, and seek ever deeper purity from the Lord. We have to be pure - like refined gold. The dark places in our souls have to be exposed to the light, our filthy rags, and our dirty wedding tunic has to be exposed, and removed. The sin that clings so closely has to be brought to the cross.

I am often asked to explain holiness. It's easy. Look at Jesus and look at yourself. Then it becomes obvious. He is totally committed to the Father, totally pure and sinless, totally surrendered in every part, totally clean, totally righteous, totally prayerful, totally worshipful, totally loving, totally powerful, totally victorious, totally humble, totally service orientated. There's no need to feel hopeless - the Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth. But to this standard we are being called.

And purity? Matthew 5 -7 gives a glimpse of the kind of lifestyle which is pure – murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, eye for eye, love for enemies, giving, prayer, fasting, worry, judging, narrow gate, false prophecy – and all pushed to the radical edge of theology.

Why must the Lord set such a high standard? Simply because this is how it is in the Kingdom, and those who set their hearts to seek this level of holiness and purity are protected by their very willingness to seek it. In this process, we squeeze out all desire to compromise, and that can be a massive chink in our armour. Good old breastplate - pushing us to the radical edge of commitment, just as Jesus did!

Our willingness to take on the fight purifies us, and the more we are purified, the deeper the battle we can take on. This surprises young or immature Christians. They take a triumphalist position, and march out against the enemy. But they should look at the character and nature of young David, as he also took on the deeper battle. He had a passion for the purity of the Lord, an understanding of evil, and was plugged in to the power of the Lord. Even so he approached things with caution, drawing on the “patriarchs’ prayers, prophets scrolls and purity of virgin souls” as he fought. Subsequent challenges to his purity were going to be intense.

The battle is without and within. Without we resist, we break down, we claim victory and live in it. We press on to win the prize. Within we are also being changed, as we press on. We have to be willing to accept both.

**I bind unto myself today
The virtues of the star lit heaven,
The glorious sun's life giving ray,
The whiteness of the moon at even,
The flashing of the lightning free,**

**The whirling wind's tempestuous shocks,
The stable earth, the deep salt sea
Around the old eternal rocks.**

These words are from a different age. Today, our minds are so full of science, that in a storm we see - a storm! Good, but in the spiritual, there is much more to creation than scientific observation. Artists have always known this truth. Constable's "Haywain" is just a load of oil paint on a canvas. If that were true, how come millions have spent many hours looking at it, and absorbing the spiritual within it?

The created order, all of it, is a reflection of the Creator, and responds to his heart. ("For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed". Romans 8:19) The created order has the Creator's power in it, and we must know how to draw strength from that power within creation. We are so hard pressed, that we cannot afford to ignore any of the help which is at hand.

So what is the advantage of this verse? It's telling us that when we view creation in the Spirit, we see that God can be seen everywhere, his power can be seen everywhere, and we are fighting within, and surrounded by that power. This is a great comfort and a spur to fight. (We will come back to this when we get to the "Christ within me" section.) We need to know this power.

**I bind unto myself today
The power of God to hold and lead,**

We are binding to ourselves two incredible attributes of God.

*** His power to hold.**

"For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Col 1:16-17)

This applies to us personally of course. ("I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand." John 10:28) but by now we should know the breastplate would never say something so elementary! The Lord holds all created order in his hands - the Universe, the heavens, the earth - everything. (Isaiah got hold of this very powerfully in chapter 40:12 to

end.) We are binding ourselves to this great “cradling” of creation in his hands. All that power, all that strength, all that awesome might, love and protection. We bind it all - all of it - to ourselves. We have bound to ourselves utterly everything that is God. What power we have!

*** His power to lead**

“Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’ Now I have told you.”
(Matthew 28:7)

Like holding, leading is essential to the Christian life. Without it we would soon end up in the swamp. But the challenge is deeper. We see it in these verses:

“They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. “We are going up to Jerusalem,” he said, “and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.” (Mark 10:32-34)

The challenge at the deeper levels of intercession is to be willing to follow him even into the swamp, and to death, and to do it willingly. I was watching an old war film recently, and there was a submarine which was about to explode, killing all the sailors. Some of them were complaining about this, (naturally) and the captain came to them and said “We are paid to fight and we are paid to die!” Tough but true. This is where leading can lead us. Are we willing?

His eye to watch, His might to stay,

Yahweh Sabaoth is big power. When he hears his people, he acts. (“I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering.” Exodus 3:7) But here’s the challenge - he does this through people. That’s what shocked Moses: - “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” (Ex.3:7)

The watching eyes and powerful hand of the Lord, a joy to all of us who are his servants, will show itself in and through us. Our intercession and life is the channel for all of this. But we fail to see or understand, the mighty torrents which God wants to pour through us will be reduced to a tiny trickle.

His ear to hearken to my need.

Yes - but to which need? So often we pray for what we see and what we need. But the essence of intercession is to know what need is in the heart of God for which we need to pray. That's what Jeremiah is saying to us. ("Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know." Jer. 33:3)

Much of our intercession misses the mark because we go for the shallow option - "Lord I need money, I need food, I need healing." But these prayers, essential though they are, belong to the shallows of faith. Our prayer should rather be "Lord what need is in your heart for which I can pray and bring into being?" This is dangerous risk taking prayer, because the Lord might reply "I need President Gaddafi to come to me." Wow! It all depends on what we want and what we want to be - and this is the key to understanding the breastplate. Again and again we are being faced with the awesomeness of prayer, and the life changing necessity of accepting prayer at this level. We either say "yes" or "no." There tends to be no further discussion.

The wisdom of my God to teach,

His hand to guide, His shield to ward;

The word of God to give me speech,

His heavenly host to be my guard.

We are beginning to move to spiritual powers and principalities – much more in the next verse. So as a preparation, the breastplate says "the heavenly host to be my guard."

I am constantly amazed at how little God's people know about this protection, and how to make use of it. Of course we don't fully understand, but there are a number of key passages which give us glimpses:-

*** Angels to serve:** "Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?" (Hebs. 1:14)

* **Archangel Michael:** “But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, because I was detained there with the king of Persia.” (Dan.10:13)

* **Chariots:** Elisha’s servant saw these, and cried out, “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!” (2 Kings 2:12)

***The glory:** “Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.” (Luke 2:13-14)

* **Angels to strengthen:** “An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him.” (Luke 22:43)

* **The proclaimers and command fulfillers** of Revelation.

* **The church guides:** Revelation 2 and 3,

* **Individual guides:** “See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. (Much debate) (Matthew 18:10)

All of these heavenly powers are there to help and guard us. A Christian is never alone - we have the angelic forces crowded in on us. But we have to accept their presence, learn to see and recognise them, so that we can command them as necessary. NATO forces in Afghanistan call up air strikes to help them, because they know there are aircraft ready at the other end of the radio. But we, God’s people, push on without often realising that we too have our “aircraft” ready to help and serve us. It saddens me that so many of God’s people have never entered this realm of experience. If they haven’t, then the breastplate stops here for them, because what follows is a severe challenge to our thinking, and needs us to be radically aware of the spiritual forces.

**Against the demon snares of sin,
The vice that gives temptation force,
The natural lusts that war within,**

We now enter the enemy’s camp, and it’s a salutary experience. The first thing we learn is that the battlefield is our hearts, minds and lives. We could make a list of these areas, but they are clarified and crystallised in Gethsemane, where the battle is clearly between self and God. The Lord wants to obey the Father.

The enemy wants him to disobey. This is the battleground of our foe, and anyone who thinks it is going to be an easy victory is studying a different Bible to mine. It was so tough, that the Lord was strengthened by an angel in this struggle. We are going to need everything to survive - the shield of faith, the angels, the power of the blood, strong internal discipline and study of the word.

Note these rather old fashioned words – “snares”, “vice”, “lusts”, “war.” Hard words to warn us that our enemy is a tough fighter.

The hostile men that mar my course;

The battle often involves people – whose eyes are blind, and who fear what we are. Some are tough and domineering, like Goliath, who moved in strength and arrogance against us. Others like Judas, do their work in the shadows, and are hard to see and oppose. Apostle Paul puts it like this:-

“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” (Ephesians 6:11-12)

A number of the Greek words in this passage do refer to earthly authorities, but Apostle Paul sees clearly that they are all being manipulated by what is happening in the spiritual realm.

Or few or many, far or nigh,

In every place and in all hours,

What a warning! There may be few opposing us, or there may be many. They may be near at hand, or far away. Whichever way we look at it, there is a massive and well organised opposition to us. The enemy may be defeated, but he is far from giving up his main ambition - to get ascendancy over God’s people, so that he many get authority over God, so that he may be God, and then chain the human spirit. This struggle never stops. It’s a 24/7 battle. (Matthew 13:24-30)

If this does not give us serious cause for concern, then I wonder what we are doing here on earth.

Against their fierce hostility I bind to me these holy powers.

It is war, and our protection is available to us - protection which the enemy cannot have. (Caleb: Numbers 14:9) But we have to bind it on, with all the consequences for our personal lives which that entails.

Against all Satan's spells and wiles,

Spells, curses, sicknesses - all these will be thrown at us. They are his favourite "fiery darts". (Eph.6:16). Then the "wiles". The enemy has method. (Gk: "Methodia") He knows how to twist and turn in the dark, upsetting personal relationships, and relationships within and between churches. He sows doubt, unbelief and fear. He tries to send the people of God to sleep, so that he is unopposed.

Against false words of heresy,

The most dangerous attacks of all come from within. Inside religion, the enemy can hide, manipulate and destroy those who oppose. He can sow heresy, so that we drift from the truth, or spend our time in fruitless debate, while he takes an ever deeper hold of the institution of the church.

Against the knowledge that defiles,

One orthodox Rabbi was asked why he didn't have a T.V. in his home. He replied "I don't want an open sewer flowing through my life!" I wouldn't go quite that far, but so much "defiling" knowledge can creep into our spirits while we absorb some, perhaps much of what we see. Pornography, the occult, deviant sex, anarchic philosophies, atheistic teaching - we have to see all this as the knowledge which defiles. Let the breastplate say it again - it defiles. If we dabble in an open sewer, we will get covered with the contents.

Many will laugh at us for even suggesting this. The "wiles" have managed to deceive, and release the knowledge that "defiles."

Against the heart's idolatry,

Idolatry is defined like this:-"the worship of idols or excessive devotion to, or reverence for some person or thing." An idol is anything that replaces the one, true God.

It seems that we have a natural bias for sin, for doing wrong and for idolatry. The one true God is not enough. We have to make our own idols. In this way we have control over them. But in fact by being idolatrous, we have succumbed to the “wiles” again.

Idolatry is placed within the teaching about the occult. Dealing with the occult is classed here as idolatry. People deal with occult because they want power. They want to idolise themselves, worship themselves, and be god. This is Satan’s goal, and he makes it ours.

Beware. Some have made the Bible their idol, knowing so much about it, but failing to recognise the One who gave it. Some have made the Church their idol, mistaking the ritual for the reality. Some have made their purity their idol, seeing it as an end in itself. The breastplate doesn’t waste words. If idolatry was not a danger to us, it would not be in this list.

Against the wizard’s evil craft,

Fifty years ago, we would have wondered about this line. But during my lifetime we have seen the emergence of palmists, mediums, wizards, witches and all the paraphernalia of the occult. It is even found in our shopping malls now. Warning – the enemy is growing in confidence.

Against the death wound and the burning, The choking wave, the poisoned shaft,

Rather old fashioned language here, but the point is crystal clear. The sting of sin is death. If anyone has not given their lives to Jesus, and has chosen any of the pathways we have seen here, then the sting will be intensely painful (Dives and Lazarus) and irreversible. (John 3:18)

I have thought a lot about these two lines. They are, in one sense, the end of the teaching, as we are about to pass into “Christ within me”. We are being warned again that this spiritual struggle, in which as intercessors we are being drawn, is not a game. This is a life and death struggle for the future of this planet and the purposes of God. It’s a ruthless bitter, deep and no-holds barred struggle, with enormous powers at work. It will come to an end eventually, with us winning. But like most wars, there will be winners and losers.

Protect me, Christ, till Thy returning.

After what we have just read, let there be a very loud “Yes!”

So many challenges - so many sleepless nights! Where can we go from here? The breastplate turns straight into the heart of Jesus, where we have been before, but this time not so much for teaching and challenge, but for comfort and strength. All good prophecy ends with encouragement, and these next verses are the encouragement we need, but not the end of the challenges - yet.

**Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me,**

There is a complete change of tone now, as we turn our eyes to Jesus. It’s been good for the breastplate to delay this. We will appreciate much more just how blessed it is to know Jesus, after we have been faced with the struggle and the challenges which the battle demands.

This total protection of the Lord is our greatest comfort, consolation, strength and victory. The essence is simple - Jesus is just there!

“Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.

If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,”
even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you. (Ps 137:7-12)

What are we supposed to learn from this? After all, we have known “Christ within me” from the beginning of our walk with the Lord. Remember, this is the breastplate, challenging us to fight. How many times, in the hardest trials have we felt alone? How often have we felt abandoned? How often have we called but got no answer? The “wiley” one wants to manipulate our emotions so that we feel alone and abandoned. But the truth is quite the opposite. We are “hemmed in on every side”, (Psalm 22) not by the bulls of Bashan, but by the Lord. Any feeling of aloneness, abandonment or despair is a total and complete lie - just what the Father of lies is good at!

Christ to win me,

The champion goes into battle for me - not just at Calvary, but every day. This is encouraging, but also another warning - it is possible to get lost in this battle, out of our depth and very desperate. But our champion will ride out to rescue us, because we are his, and his victory is ours as well.

Christ to comfort and restore me.

This is turning out to be yet another brilliant stanza, as we get into it. Christ is all around us, he is our champion so we can never ultimately be lost, and he is our:

Comfort: (Gk: “Parakletos”) which means: - “summoned, called to one's side, esp. called to one's aid.” “One who pleads another's cause with one, an intercessor.” (John 14:16) Jesus comforts us – not with a cup of tea, but with the presence of the Counsellor, the Comforter, the advocate on our behalf.

Restore: (Gk: sozo “Save me”.)

Peter had got himself into difficulty, and he called for help. (Matthew 14) Jesus “saved” him from drowning, and restored him to safety and service. Jesus saves and restores us, whatever muddle we have got ourselves into, and however many mistakes we have made.

There is such courage to be found in these statements. The battle looks very challenging, but we do not need to fear. Our champion is ever ready to comfort and restore us, to set us on our feet again, so that we can fight on. Unlike the game of chess, our King never resigns, and nor do we.

**Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.**

It's so easy to let these beautiful words roll over us, but we need to extract their blessing.

Christ beneath me, Christ above me

Twenty five years ago, our baby son, Philip died, soon after he was born. This was the beginning of a journey into miserable and dark places for me. I'm sure many reading this have been to such depths. One day, I felt so low, that I couldn't conceive things being worse. Then the Lord spoke to me. "Where are you? He said. "I am in a place of darkness, the like of which I never believed existed. Where are you?" "Look down" he said, and as I looked down to where the darkness was almost crushing, I saw the light of his presence. "However low you go and however hard it gets" he said, "Remember, I have been lower."

The breastplate would support this view, and we desperately need to know it, as we enter the bitter darkness of the coming battle.

Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,

Intercessors have to be quiet. We have to have space and time - lots of it - so that we can be in his presence and absorb his heart. But we live in a western culture which abhors silence, and sees it as a waste of time. Let's not succumb to this error. Jesus is "in" the quiet. Let's meet him there.

And in danger? It's a very strange spiritual truth that we so often have a huge increase in faith in times of stress and danger. Intercessors should not be taken by surprise in this, but should actively seek the Lord in the dangerous situations in which we will find ourselves. It's a positive attribute, not a reactive one.

**I bind unto myself the Name,
The strong Name of the Trinity,
By invocation of the same,
The Three in One and One in Three.**

We have come back to the opening verses, but now we face them, knowing all the challenges which they involve. Now we approach the binding with a much more serious mind and heart. We are challenged to bind ourselves to the Saviour. We must think carefully.

To intercede for our fallen world is going to cost us a lot more than perhaps we ever realised before - certainly I have never realised it before. To be honest, studying the breastplate and its underlying theology has shocked me. I thought I had reached a certain level of understanding of intercession, and perhaps I have, but now I find that I am still paddling in the shallows. Going forward into the depths of intercession, which is what is demanded here, is frightening.

But a decision has to be faced. The world is fragile and failing. Everywhere we look, there is disturbance. We would appear to be approaching a "time" (Gk: "Kairos"), one of those moments in spiritual history when serious change is about to come on us. In such times, game playing as Christians is totally irrelevant.

God is calling for workers who will enter the deepest part of the battle, and as his co-workers, take the stand which is needed to push back the darkness, and allow God to exercise his will. It's childish to say "God will have his way", although I hear that a lot. This is just failing to face the truth. God will have his way as we respond to his call. That's the deal. We are the body of Christ. We are the hands and feet which the Lord uses to have his way. If we fail, then it will be forty years of wandering in the wilderness, until another generation rises who will work with him so that he can have his way.

God is making a call for those who will, in "breastplate fashion," step out into the depths and fight. In our response to this call, everything will be revealed about us. Our commitment will be shown up for what it is - or what it is not. The Lord is calling for his people, and especially his intercessors to enter into his pain for the broken world, and to enter into the struggle to throw back the wily one, so that those he created and loves can be free.

This question has been asked before. “Simon Peter do you love me?” (John 21:15) Jesus was asking him “Simon Peter, do you agape me?” “Agape” is the Greek word for a deep loving commitment to another, which knows no end. Peter never understood the question, and he didn’t answer it. It led to a very very sad consequence. When Jesus asked him a third time “Do you love me?” Jesus downgraded the word for “love” from “agape” to “Phileo”, which means brotherly love – a much lower level of commitment. What an awful moment of realisation that must have been.

We must expect the same. The Lord is calling. The Lord is asking us “Do you agape me enough to stand with me in these depths of suffering and struggle?” Our answer, or lack of it, will tell him everything.

Once our decision is made, there is no turning back.

**By Whom all nature hath creation,
Eternal Father, Spirit, Word:
Praise to the Lord of my salvation,
Salvation is of Christ the Lord.**

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March 2011

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