



A THOUGHT FOR THE WEEKEND

12th May 2023

"...take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one"
Ephesians 6:16

Accident of circumstances took me, as a teenager, to a Presbyterian Church with Scottish roots and Irish connections. It was, as the Scots say, somewhat 'dour', as were the hymns they sang! One was a very long and dreary version of 'St. Patrick's Breastplate', a prayer attributed to the 5th Century Saint. (By the way, the original title is St. Patrick's *Lorica*, -a Latin word for a soldier's body-armour, and the title of the trust behind East Clayton Farm.)

The poem is a lengthy 'incantation', and as the title suggests it is a prayer for God's protection against all the temptations and attacks the writer must have been facing. He 'binds' to himself the power of God like armour. It is, of course, couched in archaic language, but in a modern version or as a hymn (worth a Google!) it is more accessible. Years ago I printed off a couple of verses to keep with me:

... 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 me 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 (thoughts*) 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, ...

(*my modification)

Perhaps St. Patrick had in mind the protective elements of St. Paul's 'Whole Armour of God' (Ephesians 6): breastplate, helmet, belt, shield. They are still necessary protection in our God-averse world. To pick just one, I'm interested by what Paul said about *"the shield of faith"*: that it *"can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one"*. The hard curved shield that Roman soldiers used in some circumstances would not extinguish flaming arrows. One theory is that they also had a thicker, lighter shield, perhaps made of leather or soft wood, hard-packed with cloth or other material. A flaming arrow penetrating such a shield would not go right through, but would be extinguished.

Paul equates that with faith. Our Christian faith cannot merely bat away the challenges of our secular world, as if they can be bounced off with a kind of easy-grace answer. We read the news, we are affected by the issues, we struggle, we hurt, we ask unanswerable questions, we face challenges in our individual lives, like *"the flaming arrows of the evil one"*. But the shield of faith absorbs and extinguishes as we trust God for things beyond our capacity and comprehension.

St. Patrick knew a thing or two! He knew our need daily to bind to ourselves the person and work of Christ, the victory he has won, the Spirit with which he fills us, and the hope we have in God. That will shield us, just for today.