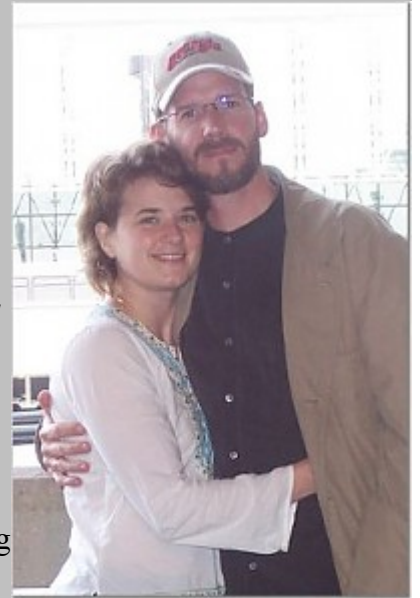


## Letters from Afghanistan: Preparing for battle

**Fr Dn Anthony**

*In this essay, I reflect on my preparations for my current deployment to Afghanistan. The scripture reading that I was studying during this time was that of Jarius petitioning the Lord for his daughter, her subsequent resurrection, and the healing of the woman with the issue of blood (St. Luke 8:41-56). I left for Afghanistan on 28 November, and will return (Lord willing) in early or mid-March. This is my second trip to Afghanistan; U.O.W. readers may remember that I was there at the end of 2003 as part of my post-9/11 reserve mobilization. This time I am going as a civilian “non-combatant”. I thank all of you for your prayers for my family and me during this time.*



There were a lot of things that I had to get done before I left home for Afghanistan. Most are things that would be familiar to anyone going on a long vacation or business trip, but there was one thing that was different enough to warrant some description – and that involves my week at Fort Benning, Georgia. I was born at Ft. Benning and have enjoyed all the opportunities the Army has given me to return (Airborne School, NCO school, etc.). This time I was going through the “CONUS Replacement Center” (CRC), the last stop for many civilians and soldiers on their way to Afghanistan and Iraq.

I have been through a lot of training in my 19 + years in the Army Reserves, and I must admit that I have not always approached it in the appropriate spirit. Nor am I alone. There is a strong temptation, born of years of relative peace and security, that sees training as something you “check off the list” on your way to promotions or new assignments, but not as something that provides useful skills. CRC was different. There was a sense of urgency and importance that had previously been missing. Rather than going through the motions to “check the block”, all of us were attentive, asking questions and repeating tasks until we were sure we would remember. This urgency came from a recognition that we are going to dangerous places where these skills (for example, first aid, IED recognition and correctly putting on armor) can save lives. Like me, most of the people going through this training were civilians. Our jobs in theater would match those of regular folks back home. We were deploying as store keepers, truck drivers, gas station attendants, computer network specialists, researchers, teachers, etc., not as combat soldiers. But “non-combatant status” and occupation don't really matter in Afghanistan or Iraq: the enemy has declared war against all of us, regardless of category. Only a fool would fail to take his preparation seriously in this kind of situation. You take things more seriously when the stakes are high. You get more motivated when your life - and the lives of those you live and work with - are on the line.

If you look at the story of Jarius and his daughter, you cannot help but notice his motivation. Ditto for the woman with the issue of blood. They did not just kind of go along hoping things would work out okay. Jarius and the woman were motivated because they saw what the world was doing to them and those they love. They knew that it would take motivation and a winning strategy to overcome this. Do we see how the world affects us and our children? Do we know how to win? Are we motivated enough to do what it takes? At Ft. Benning, we were motivated. We knew how dangerous this war on terrorism is, and we wanted to learn how to survive it. All of us want to survive, don't we?

The unfortunate fact is that we are engaged in serious warfare. People are dying every day in this war. Terrible, painful deaths. Senseless deaths. Loved ones and strangers are suffering horribly and dying alone in

this war. Without a sense of hope. Without a sense of purpose. Our enemy is cruel and heartless. Our enemy is evil. He is completely bent on our destruction. He has been perfecting his craft and is terribly effective. There is no think tank or army on earth smart or good enough to protect us from this threat. Are the Islamist jihadists really that good? No. I am not referring to them. They are not the true danger. Do not misunderstand me: the Taliban, al Qaeda, and all their ilk are dangerous and are bent on either destroying or enslaving us. They commit horrible, wicked, and blasphemous deeds on a daily basis. But they are only pawns in a greater conflict. The real war is the war for our souls (e.g. Mark 8: 35-37). It is against “principalities, against powers, against the rules of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.” (Ephesians 6: 11-13)

What does this war look like? Suicide bombings and other acts of physical violence are certainly part of it. But it doesn't take much discernment to see that the war is being waged all around us. This world is a sick place, and the casualties are piled up around us. This is sometimes referred to as a “spiritual war”, but physical manifestations of this war abound: sexual licentiousness, hedonism, divorce, estrangement, gossip - the list of depravities describes the very foundations of modern society. The world was created good, but now it “groans in sin” (Romans 8:22). The enemy uses this and makes it seem natural, even good. As Christians - as survivors - we must recognize this perversion, but we must not participate in it. As Christ said to his disciples, “it is impossible but that offenses will come: but woe unto him, through him they come! It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones.” (St. Luke 17: 1-2).

Which brings me back to Jarius. The world had been killing his daughter, just as the world is killing our children. Are we motivated to save them? He was, so he found the Savior and brought Him to his home. We must do the same. Our homes, like our churches, must be sanctuaries; set off from the wickedness of the world and filled with Christ and His salvific mercy and love. A sanctuary is a place insulated from the battle - why should we let the enemy into our homes? It is odd, but we would never let perverts, con-men, or prostitutes into our home to spend time with our children, but many of us do not think twice about keeping the television on or letting children onto the internet without supervision. In ancient battles, the enemy would tunnel under castle walls or knock down doors with battering rams; the internet and television (both of which can be good and useful) make things much easier for him now.

The reality of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq is that no matter how well we prepare, we will still suffer losses. No matter how hard we fight, there will still be casualties. Here in theater it is the random IED, rocket shot, or sniper's bullet that does most of the damage. There is no 100% solution against these. It affects all of us when we learn of another slaughter of innocents in the streets of Bagdad, or another soldier being killed by terrorists. For my secular job, I am involved in the project to bring an end to the war in Afghanistan. We have a plan that involves rebuilding the country and undermining support for the insurgents through economic development, political reform, and the provision of security. It is a good plan and there are many good people working it. My part in this is to help us understand the enemy so that we can carry this plan out with as little loss of life as possible. But even complete understanding and the best of reforms may not bring victory here. We could lose. The same is true in Iraq. But I do not lose sleep over this, nor should you. Because neither this war in Afghanistan nor the one in Iraq is the real war. The real war is for our souls and for the souls of our children. Alleluia, there is a strategy that is 100% effective for this war, a strategy that no wile of the enemy can circumvent or adapt to and overcome. That strategy is faith in our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ:

- Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, and took it out of the way, nailing it to the cross; and having spoiled the principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it. (Colossians 2: 14-16)
- O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?... But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the word of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not

in vain in the Lord. (1 Corinthians 15: 55, 57-58)

- Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God; for whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God? (1 John 5: 1a, 4-5)

To win this war for ourselves, for our children, and for all mankind, we must recognize and embrace Christ with the faith of the woman with the issue of blood. He will heal us as He did her, and we will grow in Him and Him in us. Finally, united in Him and with Him as our head, we ourselves can embrace all God's children in His love, remove the cursed worldly millstone from around their necks, and share the life-bestowing victory of Christ. Parts of Afghanistan are dangerous. The Taliban and al Qaeda are still trying to sow chaos and destruction here. But I, for one, am not afraid. Not because of my training, or the fact that I am surrounded by the best soldiers in the world, or because I am especially brave, but because the greatest victory has already been won. And I - like all of you - share in that victory.