

Sermon, St Andrew's, 20th September 2020

15th Sunday after Trinity, *Battle of Britain* Sunday (80th anniv.)

Philippians 1.21-30 + St Matthew 20.1-6

(Battle of Britain Sunday in Newcastle is usually kept the week after the peak of the fighting (15th September), to allow our nearest RAF Squadron, Boulmer in Northumberland, to parade both in Newcastle this week, and also locally in Alnwick the week before.)

*May I write in thankful memory of all who gave their lives for us eighty years ago, in encouragement for all the RAF family today, and in the Name of our loving Lord, one God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost. **Amen.***

What a pair of readings for *Battle of Britain* Sunday! As The Few fade from the living memory of many, the question changes and evolves: how should our inheritance from those days inspire and inform our lives today?

What do our readings say about this?

St Paul writes first of death and life - a desire to depart, and a need to stay. Many of us at different stages of life may have various responses to this text - and of course those who fought, dying or surviving, eighty years ago, had a similar spiritual range: from the indestructibility of youth, through temptations to fatalism - and incredible courage. The Padre of the great RAF station (now museum) at Duxford wrote well during the Battle "how ought you to live well, if you think you'll be dead soon?" - to which one of my older Cadets suggested a response involving drinking; and of course many of us can be tempted to retreat in times of challenge. One purpose of the modern funeral rite is to help us to "live life in the light of eternity" - and, 80 years ago in that vital, intense

summer, so many of us and our allies wrestled with different answers to that: when hope and peace could be desperately elusive, but courage, comradeship and creativity could point the way: some things, like happiness, can't always best be sought directly.

How does St Paul write about his own challenge?

As a second point today: he writes of conviction and continuing, of suffering and struggling; of standing firm and striving side by side - words just as relevant for each of us in this strange year, amid all our very different challenges, as they were for our young people in the "front line" eighty years ago - and all who supported them. He writes of not being intimidated, of making progress - and of joy! Of abundance, belief, and salvation. In the face of death, St Paul reaches out to us with things that are eternal; and an assurance, not of easy, effortless rest now, but of assistance in the midst of strife - the Passion Chorale assures us "that I may fight befriended, and see, in my last strife, to me Thine arms extended, upon the Cross of life".

Thirdly, what does our Gospel say?

The first shall be last, and the last shall be first.

This most discomfiting of readings (with the strong language we can often find in St Matthew's record of our Christ) strikes me most immediately in that most awkward of questions - who got a medal? Many of those who fought soon after the official end of the Battle of Britain did not get that campaign "bar" - and some who only fought at the end ("tail-end Charlies", as it were!) were awarded the same as those who had "borne the heat and burden of the day".

But we are inspired to look at a Lord who offers us eternity, and equal measure for each; and in which we are saved by love, by the

sacrifice of another, giving His life without being asked; this young Saviour who is both eternal Word, and always 33 in my mind; eternity in which envy and dispute fade in the light of that loss and love.

So today, as we look back in thanksgiving and seek to peer forward through a rapidly-changing world, let us keep our eyes on the horizon of eternity, on what truly matters, on long perspective; and on values that endure, equipment for the spiritual struggles that each of us face, meeting suffering with courage together, sustained by abundant grace, faith, hope and love.

And so I pray for blue skies for our fallen, for all our RAF family and Church, to make spiritual progress as St Paul would counsel us in Christ, in a motto dating back to the Roman poet Virgil - *per ardua ad astra*: through adversity, to the stars.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

AMEN.

Poetry of war and loss may be simple, profound; both - or neither. The film The Way to the Stars speaks of how the RAF family moved forward from the Battle of Britain, and includes a poem with a variety of responses, but which has been much in my mind as I wrote:

Do not despair For Johnny-head-in-air;
 He sleeps as sound As Johnny underground
 Fetch out no shroud For Johnny-in-the-cloud;
 And keep your tears For him in after years.
 Better by far For Johnny-the-bright-star,
 To keep your head And see his children fed.

(MALCOLM TOFT)

