

RAF 100 / Battle of Britain Sunday 2018

We gather today to mark the 100th anniversary of the Royal Air Force and also the 78th anniversary of the Battle of Britain – which in the words of Sir Winston Churchill ‘turned the tide of the 2nd World War’.

Many of us have connections with the RAF. I can truly say if it was not for the RAF I wouldn't be here! Both my parents served in the RAF – my dad was in the military police during his National Service and mum joined to become a nurse. They met while serving in Germany and the rest as they say is history. So that is something to give thanks for – isn't it!!

There are many famous people who have served in the RAF – actors Richard Attenborough, Brian Blessed, Peter Sellers, Richard Burton; poet & TV celebrity Pam Ayres; rugby player Rory Underwood; TV personality Bruce Forsyth; author Roald Dahl; Rolling Stones bass player Bill Wyman and of course Prince William.

Thousands of men & women have served in the Royal Air Force over the last 100 years.

Today the RAF is engaged in 15 missions, on 4 continents, in 22 countries.

The RAF is involved as part of a strategy to promote peace and they are often called on to help in relief operations.

For example when the Caribbean was hit by a Hurricane, with wind at speeds of 185 mph. The RAF was an important part of the relief operation.

So many have served in what we can only imagine at times were terrifying situations while trying to protect other people's right to live in peace and safety.

And we have indeed remembered today all those who laid down their lives in the service of others. But on this 100th anniversary we give thanks for all who have served in the RAF.

Not everyone found it easy to be allowed to serve at all. This year a woman called Mary Ellis died at the age of 101. Mary Ellis blazed a trail for female pilots, as one of the first women to fly Spitfires, heavy bombers and jet aircraft.

She was a member of the Air Transport Auxiliary, which employed civilians to deliver planes from factories to airfields during the Second World War.

However, her contribution to the war effort was not always appreciated. At one RAF base, the ground crew refused to believe she was the pilot of the Wellington bomber she had just landed.

She said - "They actually went inside the aeroplane and searched it. Everybody was flabbergasted that a girl could fly."

Her teenage "passion for the skies" had led to flying lessons at Witney airfield. When war broke out, a flying licence and that experience made her a suitable candidate for the ATA, which allowed qualified women to join as pilots from 1940.

The idea had a mixed reception.

The Aeroplane magazine fumed in a 1940 editorial: "Women anxious to serve their country should take on work more befitting their sex instead of encroaching on a man's occupation."

Mary Ellis later recalled "Girls flying aeroplanes was almost a sin at that time."

She said the work was "exhilarating and sometimes very dangerous. Pilots often flew unfamiliar aircraft. You'd get out of a Tiger Moth into a Wellington bomber and then into a Spitfire."

Mary Ellis came close to death on several occasions.

When the ATA was disbanded in 1945, Mary was seconded to the RAF, where she became one of the first women to fly Britain's first jet fighter, the Gloster Meteor.

Mary was an ordinary young woman who did extraordinary things and the RAF gave her that opportunity during the Second World War.

Ordinary people doing extraordinary things in the service of God, their country and for people they would never meet.

By all accounts the summer of 1940 was one of sunshine but however bright the skies, for those who valued their freedom and liberty, those were very dark days and they needed extraordinary people.

The nation faced an enemy who were planning to invade. But before they launched such an invasion they first sought to gain air superiority and so demoralise the people of Britain by wave after wave of attacks, not only of strategic posts but also to blitz many important cities, including Liverpool.

The German Airforce had around 3000 aircraft, while the RAF had about 650 aircraft. So outnumbered by 4:1.

But freedom and liberty, those basic human rights, were not going to be surrendered lightly.

As today's Gospel put it, they were prepared to lay down their lives for others, for the free world, out of a sense of duty, of loyalty and of love.

544 pilots in 1940 did make the supreme sacrifice.

Queen Elizabeth described the Battle of Britain as “a struggle for national survival, as a last stand against a new dark age.”

Well, as we know, that battle between the air forces of Britain and Germany was won by the RAF, in spite of the massive disparity of aircraft numbers.

As Churchill famously commented, “never in the field of human conflict was so much owed to so few.”

Yes, the Battle of Britain is a kind of David and Goliath story, of victory against overwhelming odds.

That summer of 1940 saw the triumph - Of good over evil.
Courage over fear. Light over darkness
Freedom over tyranny Hope over despair.

But as someone once said, “Memories are not enough. It’s what you do with memories that is important.”

What inspiration can the Battle of Britain and Mary Ellis give us today, and indeed what inspiration can we gain from all the women & men who have served in the RAF.

Sadly, for the past number of years there has been a steady lurch to extremism and extremist positions – in politics and in religion.

As we remember the bravery of those who have served, we are reminded to be equally vigilant and courageous to preserve freedom against those who would seek to undermine it.

In the film, ‘Dead Poets’ Society, the late Robin Williams, as teacher John Keating, told his pupils “No matter what people tell you, words and ideas can change the world”. We need to stand up and speak out for those words and ideas which promote what is right and true and good.

Again, in our Gospel reading Jesus says very firmly “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you”.

Jesus does not say this might be a good idea, or if you really don’t mind or if you have the time. He said this is my commandment.

No messing about – Jesus has called us to love one another.

Also note the lack of choice. Jesus does not say love those who we are comfortable with, who speak like us, who think like us.

Jesus very firmly says – regardless of colour, gender, creed, sexuality, opinion, race, background – love one another.

Ordinary women and men, against all expectations, rose to the challenge to become defenders of freedom.

Now it is our turn.

They are an inspiration and a challenge for each of us ordinary people to stand up and speak out.

And it starts by the way we treat each other – through the spoken word, through the use of social media, by our actions.

Do we show respect to others or are we only working for our own agenda? Is our view of the world big enough to accept and love others or are we so caught up in our own bubble that we don't see what Jesus is calling us to be and do?

As Christians we also remember the victory of Christ. Many of the religious leaders of his day thought this son of Mary to be “a common, unconsidered man”. Yet they felt threatened by his teaching about love and forgiveness.

And Jesus inspires us today to work tirelessly for good over evil, courage over fear, light over darkness and hope over despair.

We remember and are inspired by the courage and bravery of those who have served for others. Let us pick up that baton and do more than give lip service in our service of God and others.