

## Battle of Britain Anniversary Service 2019

### *Ephesians 6:10-17*

There are some things in history that are too dark to laugh at, and generally speaking I am inclined to think the Nazis are among them.

That said, there is a very, very funny sketch well worth a Google search afterwards. It's by Mitchell and Webb, and is about two German soldiers – indeed, SS soldiers, so not just ordinary German Army, but hard-core Nazi troops. One of them begins to worry about the emblem on their caps – the skull. Who exactly would choose the skull as their sign, he wonders? It's not exactly a positive, inspirational symbol. And then, full of anxiety, he asks his friend, 'Hans – are we the baddies?'

You could indeed hardly make it up: skulls on their cap-badges. It is the sign for the cursed, for those in love with death, for malevolence and terror. The SS, and that whole Nazi state, were indeed the baddies. To a degree almost unparalleled in human history, they really were the embodiment of evil. The war against them was not just another one of the seemingly endless conflicts which now nobody can quite explain and which once plagued this continent. Defeat would not just have been a temporary national set-back. Lose *this* war – lose the Battle of Britain – and evil would have swept in. In would have come the Gestapo, the SS, the racial laws, the deportation trains, the camps, the gas. Hitler's darkness would have settled over all Europe, and it is not clear when if ever it would have lifted. *This* war was a rare moment of gleaming moral clarity, and the courage of this country in daring to stand and fight when all seemed lost – and so, in the end, to save all – was simply magnificent.

The problem with clarity, though, is that life isn't usually like that. Evil does not always look quite as obvious as the Nazis did – it does not always come marching under the sign of the skull. And we would be kidding ourselves if we thought that because sixty four years ago we defeated Nazism that we had actually beaten *evil*, that we no longer needed to be on guard, armed and ready against it. That's what the Bible reading is all about: 'our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood' – not just the Luftwaffe, not even Hitler and the SS – 'it is against the rulers, the authorities, the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.' In other words, not just against the Nazis, but against the spiritual realities which created and drove Nazism, against all the deep poisons which swirled together and took temporary form in Hitler and his gang. Poisons which are still there, working perhaps less obviously, more insidiously now – but no less deadly for all that.

What do I mean? I mean everything that was at the heart of Nazism. I mean the exaltation of power and brute strength. I mean the contempt not only for the weak and the slow, but for the kind and gentle. I mean the love of violence and the hatred of the other, especially of the Jew. I mean the arrogance which recognises no limits to what power can do, no moral law before which all must bow. I mean the delight in cruelty, the desire to hurt, humiliate and torment before destroying. That's what made the Nazis evil. It wasn't just that they were on the other side, it was that these poisons filled their souls. And what St. Paul is saying in this reading is, look: that's what you've got to defend yourself against. This darkness, this poison, is out to get you. So put on the whole armour of God, and stand firm.

And that does not mean 'jump into a fighter jet and blow something up.' That might, sometimes, terribly become necessary – but it is not the first line of defence. The first line, oddly enough, is something like this: sitting in a church service, remembering the great battle, and having the courage to ask ourselves: where? Where might the poison our forebears fought off then be trying to get in now? Where might we, as a country and a culture, be letting darkness settle and grow? Where might I, as an individual, have let my guard down? Where might the same poisons that flowed in the Nazis be beginning their work on me? It might not look obvious, it might not be dramatic – but that, of course, is precisely why it is so dangerous. When evil struts around with a skull on its cap and a swastika armband, you fight back. When evil is clever, it goes incognito. Softly, subtly. To beat it this time, you need first of all to spot it.

And where should you look? Well, try looking at how we conduct our politics now. No matter where you stand on the great Brexit debate, it is simply dangerous how we've started talking and thinking about each other: 'traitors', 'extremists', 'thugs'. One of our greatest childrens writers 'jokes' that the Prime Minister should be hung from the nearest lamp-post. This is the language of contempt, and contempt is near the heart of darkness. Or if politics is not your thing, try thinking of three murders this week in Camden as gangs and knives get out of control; think of the young man who lost his life on Gammons Lane, or the other young man who lost his hand right here in Abbots Langley. What's behind all that but the love of power, and contempt for human life? And if it still seems distant from your life: try thinking of pornography. Not often you'll be told that from a pulpit. But listen, boys and men especially: despite all the attempts to normalise it, what is flowing in so much of that imagery is *contempt*. Contempt for women and girls, as if all they exist for is to be used and consumed, sexual violence displayed as entertainment. It is not normal and it is not OK. It is poison, and it will warp your soul. There's a link – incredible as it might seem - between the SS and your internet browsing history, and that link is contempt for other human beings. It is deadly poison. So be on your guard.

Because, you see, there is a war on. You gather to remember one war, and as Cadets you prepare, ultimately, to be ready for another one. I hope it never comes, that none of you ever have to serve in actual military combat. But in truth, you are at war already. We always have been and we always will be: against the darkness and the poison, against the spiritual forces of evil. At war nationally and culturally, at war on the most intimately personal levels.

And what is the source of our strength in that fight? What is that means that however dark things seem, however strongly the poison flows, victory is sure? It is the one for whom this church was built. This man: Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus of Nazareth: the one in whom there is no darkness at all, no poison, no contempt; in whom there is only life and light and strength. Jesus of Nazareth who on the Cross suffered all the poison the world could throw, and came through it loving and forgiving and stronger still, risen from the dead. Jesus of Nazareth, who, if you'll let him, will share his life with yours, drain you of poison and fill you with power. *He* is the reason darkness loses. Not our bombs, not our bullets: *He* is the reason. So in the act of commitment that follows later in this service, I invite you to swear your allegiance to Him, and to his Kingdom. To him be the glory, forever and ever.