

Battle of Britain Thanksgiving Service, 16th September 2018 @ St. Lawrence, 11.30am.

Matthew 5:38-48

What kind of service is this?

Is it a Memorial Service? Is it like Remembrance Day, an occasion where above all we remember the dead, and pay them tribute?

Or is it a Thanksgiving Service, a celebration of victory? Where as well as remembering, we give thanks to God that *we won*?

Usually, we shy away from that kind of language. It feels a bit too much like the worst bits of the Old Testament, where people were all too clear that God was on their side, and saw God as like a big warrior fighting their battles. The more sophisticated and thoughtful we are, the more we tend to distance ourselves from all that. The more we set aside thoughts of victory, and think simply on the pity of war.

Well, today we do not. Today *is* a victory celebration, and we should be clear about it.

In the summer of 1940, this country stood alone against overwhelming odds.

And not just against overwhelming odds, but against a regime which truly deserves all the words which lose their force through over-use: barbaric, evil, monstrous.

If we had lost, if the Nazis had taken this country, our Jews would have gone to the camps. Many more would have followed them. Our freedoms would have died. Hitler would have reigned unchallenged over Western Europe and it is debatable when, if ever, that domination would have ended.

So yes, we should be overcome with gratitude towards those who fought that battle, the famous Few. We should also be *proud*. There is a lot about our country that is easy to mock, easy to belittle. It is easy to laugh about patriotism. But *this*. This was magnificent. We did not surrender, when it would have been so easy to do. We did not make peace with the monster. We stood and we fought and we prevailed. It was indeed our finest hour. So the first thing we do today is stand tall and proud and say we honour the RAF, and all our forces. We celebrate their victory, and we will never, ever forget.

But there's a problem, isn't there, doing it in a church? Matthew Chapter 5 puts it very plainly. *I say to you, do not resist an evil-doer. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you.* Do not resist an evil doer. The right response to being attacked is to let the attacker have their way. It is better to be killed, than to kill. And the man who said all that, lived it. He refused to use force, even when they used force on him. He did not resist evil: he let them nail him up and kill him, and he loved them even to the end.

So how can we stand here, in Jesus' house, and celebrate winning a war?

Well, some would say that Jesus was only ever talking about personal behaviour, how you deal with people in 1-1 situations. That he never said what to do when nations go to war, when civilians are being slaughtered, when people are being dragged off to camps. And certainly after a very short time indeed, the early Church decided that Christians are not pacifists. There are times, we decided, when the things God cares about most – defending the weak, doing justice, making peace – mean fighting for them. Means, terribly, killing for them.

I think that's true. If you're faced with Nazism, like we were in 1940, there is no moral choice but to fight. The things God cares about most were served by Britain fighting, and winning.

But ... there is a big but. Because even if Jesus never gave instructions about how to run foreign and defence policy, he did live his life.

And in that life, he simply refused to destroy anyone, for any reason.

And Christian faith says that this life is God, and that we are at our best, we are what we are made for, when we are most like him. So violence and killing – no matter how good our reasons – are a step away from what we are meant to be. In old-fashioned language, they're sin.

This is the complicated thing, you might even say the contradictory thing. We were right to fight the Nazis. Absolutely right. But, when we fought them, when we killed, we took a step away from what we're meant to be. We sinned. We were not made to kill each other. We were not made to riddle some poor German boy's body with lead, to burn him to death in his cockpit, to send him crashing into the sea to drown. When we do these things – no matter how good our reasons – God weeps. He made that German boy too. And when we kill him, we become that little less human. Even when we're right, we go wrong.

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And so our task today is simple. We pay tribute, yes, we honour, yes. We sing with pride for what victory in the Battle of Britain meant.

But we also ask ourselves: what kind of person am I? Am I kind of person who makes war less likely? Am I a person of peace? Am I someone who will not be driven by fear, by greed, by revenge, and who will not readily be taken in by those who are? Will I refuse to view my neighbour with contempt, to be casual about his life and his death? Will I remember the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth that we are all children of the same heavenly Father?

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Amen.

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