

## **“THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN”**

**St Laurence’s, Ludlow, 14 September 2003  
Address by Sir Leslie Fielding, Lay Reader**

I was never a serving airman, only (once) a soldier. But the music of the Royal Air Force March Past always makes my scalp tingle and a shiver run down my spine. I was seven at the outbreak of World War II. An eight year old Londoner when the Battle of Britain took place which we commemorate today. Later generations may well see the battle as past history and one of many conflicts in which the British fought and won. But, for a man of my generation, it is easy and natural to keep faith with the memory of “The Few”, even if I was only a boy at the time.

Sadly, those young RAF pilots of 1940 who survived the war have, as old men now, been steadily dying off. We still see occasional obituaries in the national press of those phenomenal pilots, heroes of our childhood. But, in the course of nature, over the next very few years, we shall see the last of those immensely brave men go to the graves which were so nearly theirs sixty three years ago.

“So long ago”, I hear people say. “Perhaps now we can draw a line – get rid of this pre-occupation with the Second World War: look forward, not back”.

In one way, of course, they are right – we should not live in the past at the expense of the future. We did not win the war to neglect the peace. We have made friends of our enemies, and sewn goodness where there was evil. But, in another way, they’re wrong. To forgive one’s enemies is not to forget one’s friends and defenders. The past carries lessons which it is unwise to neglect.

Today, we celebrate Battle of Britain Sunday, and honour the young men who fought – and so many of whom died – together with all those men and women who supported them from the ground (the technicians; the boffins; the air controllers; the radar operators, and ack ack gunners; the factory workers – my mother was one of them – who produced the Spitfires and Hurricanes and their armaments) and who thereby helped to make the victory possible.

Even in so fast changing a world, 60 years is a short span in the life of nations; and I suggest to you that once a year isn’t anything like too much for us to remember how very different the history of the world would have been if Britain had been invaded in 1940. We should certainly have to re-write the history of Europe – and with a very different kind of European Union .....

So, it makes no sense at all to dismiss from remembrance events of importance simply because they happened “a long time ago”. By our physical presence in Church this morning, we acknowledge events which happened a *very* long time ago. We also the greatest fact of all human history: that, in an unfashionable corner of the Roman Empire, events took place which have led the Christian Church, through the millennia, to declare that in Jesus, God acted as through no one else, because God and Jesus share the same substance.

As we look back at the life of Christ, we get many of the same arguments as we get over milestones of history like the Battle of Britain. Can something so long ago, really affect us now? And why, people ask, why THEN – two thousand years ago? Why, of all places, in PALESTINE?

The answer comes in a very small, very simple philosophical exercise. For anything to have happened, it has to have happened in a HERE. For anything to have happened, it has to have happened in a NOW. So that, if something happens here and now, it will become, with the passage of time, a THEN and a THERE.

So where something happened, and when something happened, doesn’t necessarily have any relationship to the on-going importance of that event. There’s no need for us to be edgy, or defensive, or anxious that the events on which the Christian Faith is founded happened in a particular time and place (long ago and far away) – for that becomes true of everything that happens!

Nearer to us, in both time and space – 63 years ago, over the skies of Britain – an invasion was fought of Many of those who are old enough, as I am, have memories of the battle. Mine, in London in 1940, of barrage balloons swinging slowly on their cables, while up above was a very blue sky, with vapour trails, and smudges of black smoke, and what seemed like silver aeroplanes, as wings were caught in the sunlight. Just once or twice, I also recall a sound like calico tearing – of eight Browning machine guns spitting out bullets at a rate of a thousand or so a minute.

Our losses were, of course, heavy. The Hurricane, if a stable gun-platform, with an air frame that could absorb a lot of punishment, was not as fast as it should have been. The early Spitfire's Rolls Royce Merlin engine sometimes had carburettor hiccups in a power dive. Cockpit armour was light or non-existent. In 1940, none of our fighters was armed with cannon. Pilots sat in cramped cockpits on top of gallons of high octane, in non self-sealing fuel tanks. It took skill and courage to press home a successful interception.

Precisely because of this courage and skill, enemy losses were consistently heavier than ours. I recall running my hands over the grey fuselage of a Messerschmidt 109 which had belly-landed in a London public park and was being guarded by an elderly member of "Dad's Army". The German pilot had been lucky: there had been no fire and the Home Guard said he had got out alive – just.

The Battle of course, went on well beyond 1940. The RAF defended these islands for five more arduous and bloody years. Bombers did, of course, get through the fighter screens. I recall the winter nights of "the Blitz" the improvised and often water-logged Anderson air raid shelters at the bottom of the garden; the wail of air raid sirens; the tinkle of shrapnel, falling on roofs and tarmac roads. On one memorable occasion, the screaming descent of three German bombs alongside our London house, inside which mother and I lay under a steel Morris table. Towards the end of the war, in 1944 and 1945 came the spluttering motorbike engines of the V1 "Buzz bombs"; the earth-shaking thud, without warning of approach, of the German V2 rockets, until the RAF snuffed them out on their launch pads in the Low Countries.

With the passage of time, and as death comes inevitably to us all, those personal memories will vanish. Just as, in the long perspective of history, those men and women who knew the Son of God in His humanity themselves died – so that we of the succeeding generations have had to cling to The Faith without the benefit of having seen Jesus for ourselves, and heard His voice, as Our Lord walked the roads and the villages and the valleys and the hills of Palestine – two thousand years ago.

What does come clearly to us across all those years, alongside Christ's acceptance of the sorrows and dangers of human life, is the unmistakable message of goodness and self-giving love as the guiding principle of the whole Creation of God's. As Mrs. Rowlands reminded us, from the reading from the Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew, we Christians are even required to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors.

We do well to remember, as we pass the small milestones of our own individual lives – and as we commemorate the great events of our national history – that the greatest battle of all was fought and won on a Cross, on a little hill outside the city of Jerusalem, two thousand years ago.

In faith and hope and love, in a world which makes sense because of the Cross, all of us have today another opportunity to re-dedicate ourselves to whatever new service may be required of us. And to those members of the Royal Air Force – those still living with honour among us, and those who have already gone before us into eternity – who, by their service in 1940, 1941 and throughout World War II, made possible our present liberty, we can say thank you, in the words of that marvellous Celtic Benediction:

Deep peace of the Running Wave to you.  
Deep peace of the Flowing Air to you.  
Deep peace of the Quiet Earth to you.  
Deep peace of the Shining Stars to you.  
Deep peace of the Son of Peace to you.

Thanks be to God.

