

Sermon preached by The Venerable Ray Pentland CB at Evensong to mark the 85 Anniversary of the Battle of Britain on 16 September 2025

65 years a young RAF Chaplain preached his first Battle of Britain sermon. During the entire sermon he avoided any mention of the Battle. As the Station Commander left he commented, 'Padre, rather disappointing that you neglected to mention the Battle of Britain.' 'Well sir, I wasn't born when the Battle took place and I have no experience to speak of'.

The Station Commander considered this and responded 'Well, I really do look forward to what you have to say about Christmas and Easter'.

85 years ago our, nation stood on the brink of invasion.

Churchill had declared as the summer of 1940 blossomed:

'I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin. Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilisation.'

It was a moment when the nation held its breath.

Could there be hope in the midst of uncertainty?

Could there be a glimmer of light in the midst of threatened darkness?

Could there be victory against the might of an enemy within bombing range of our nation's capital, and this very cathedral and beyond?

Could there be salvation?

This turning point in our nation's history is the story of victory and of salvation.

It is the story of Cam's Hurricane,

Mitchells spitfire,

Dowding's preparation,

Parks strategy

and Churchill's leadership.

It is the story of the thousands of men and women,

who plotted and planned;

who engineered and served;

who loved and lost;

who fought and won.

It is the story of victory against all odds.

It is the story of those who escaped occupied Europe and those from the free world,

Who joined with those from the then Empire to defend freedom

It is the story of the few and the debt we owe.

Could they have dreamt that it would really become our finest hour?

Could they have imagined that the work of their hands would become the salvation of our nation?

Our first reading challenges us to

*sing the praises of famous men,
our ancestors in their generations.*

We do that this evening as we remember the Few – for

Through their Bravery our Freedom was won.

It has been one of the great privileges of my ministry to know many of those we call the few.

They did not think of themselves as hero's, though we do.

We have heard the words of Tom and Geoffrey speaking for the young men for the young men of Fighter Command.

What they neglect to say is that it was bravery that drove them to climb into their aircraft for sortie after sortie, 4, 5 and more a day, knowing what was waiting.

In a battle against overwhelming odds, it is impossible to imagine what they felt, what they experienced; however, the few often spoke of the overwhelming sense of physical and emotional exhaustion during the battle - and yet they kept going.

Listen again to Geoffrey Wellum, who was just over 18 during the Battle,

'In most lives, I suppose there comes a time when one has to make a supreme effort that calls for every morsel of more and more endeavour and more than not that effort has to be sustained. With me I am certain that my time came with my 3 years as an operational fighter pilot in our country's finest hour. I grieve for my lost friends in the Sqn, I had reached the pinnacle of my life before the age of 22.'

Somehow, they found an inner strength to do what needed to be done despite exhaustion, despite fear. It was an example that would soon be followed by Bomber Command, and is emulated by today's RAF who keep our nation's air space safe.

The OT prophet Isaiah reminds us that even when we grow weary the Lord our God will not. 'The Lord is the everlasting' we are told:

For here is the birth of hope,

here the light against darkness:

here is where strength is renewed,

here is the strength to soar on wings as eagles.

here is the promise of God's provision –

And it available for all.

When we feel we can take no more, give no more, when we are emotionally and physically drained, God provides for our wellbeing. This is where can we find strength for 'those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength; they will run and not grow weary.'

Through their Sacrifice our freedom was won.

Bravery often results in **Sacrifice**.

This is the cost of service. This is the example we have before us.

We commemorate the 544 members of Fighter Command who made the ultimate sacrifice and of the many others who died during the Battle.

However, many others sacrificed life as they knew it, and suffered and physical, mental, and spiritual pain throughout their lives. This is the cost of our freedom.

Our second reading challenges us in the revelation of a God who loves us so much that he became one of us, who put on the uniform of humanity, who lived and taught love and a set of values so radical that he was crucified, but conquered death and lives today.

Here is sacrifice that brings hope in the midst of uncertainty, light in darkness. Jesus' own self-sacrifice on the cross the ultimate example of love and service. Here is sacrifice that brings salvation and freedom.

85 years ago our Freedom was threatened. We may sing 'Britain never, shall be slaves'. But only because the Victory we celebrate today stopped that possibility in its tracks.

Just as for the Christian, without Christmas there is no Easter, without the Battle of Britain, there is no D day; no VE; no VJ day. This is the beginning.

We call it the Battle of Britain but it was the Battle for the world as Churchill suggested.

The few were called upon to fight and resist an evil power, which sought to quench the very breath of freedom which enlivens us. However, this is not Freedom without responsibility for that is reckless and indeed dangerous.

There are those today who would threaten such freedom by seeking to destroy democracy through creating instability, and uncertainty, by spreading fear and hatred, taking no responsibility and so challenging the very freedom, that builds a society that is welcoming, compassionate, and celebrates difference, free to fulfil the command of Jesus to love one another as He has loved us, and that may demand sacrifice.

We are here in this house of God, in thanksgiving because 85 years ago, while the nation held its breath, the few, supported by the many, took to the skies, challenged evil, and through their

Bravery and Sacrifice won our Freedom.

May we ever be thankful to God for those we call the Few.