

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 20th September 2020

My Dad seldom spoke about his wartime experiences. He served as a very young man in the Fleet Air Arm and much of that time was spent in the Atlantic Convoys. He learned to fly in Canada, having crossed the Atlantic aboard the Queen Elizabeth, adorned in her battleship grey!

Like many boys my age, I grew up reading Biggles books and making and painting Airfix model planes – the Spitfire, the Lancaster, the Mosquito all flew over my bed for several years.

I was born into the post-war generation which was the first NOT to have experienced the realities of war first hand, but for whom the signs of World War II were evident in the stories told by my parents and grandparents, recalling the nights when they stood in their garden in Johnstone, watching in horror as Clydebank was razed to the ground in a series of air raids.

This past week a special anniversary was marked in quiet way in countless villages, towns and cities throughout the United Kingdom.

The 80th Anniversary of a battle that took place in the skies over the south east of England in the summer of 1940, a battle fought between the Royal Air Force and the might of the German Luftwaffe. It is called The Battle of Britain.

It was a vital battle in the Second World War because both sides were fighting to control the skies over Britain.

If the RAF had been defeated, then the hordes of the German Wehrmacht and all the horrors that were Nazism might have been able to come across the English Channel and we would have been invaded and our lives today would have been so different.

But the RAF were not defeated.

Pilots of fighter planes went up day after day during that warm summer of 1940 to defend Britain against German attacks.

2,353 British RAF pilots took part in the Battle, and 574 from other countries – that sounds a lot, but compared with the millions who fought in the War, it wasn't many at all.

No wonder The Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, famously said after the Battle, "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few."

Ever since then, those 2,927 men have been known as the Few. We remember them especially just now because it was on the 15th September 1940 that the biggest of the air battles took place.

After that day, the Luftwaffe gave up their attempt to win the air battle over England.

Of those who made up "The Few" in the Battle of Britain, 544 were killed and another 791 were killed later in the War. Many of the survivors went back to quiet family lives. Some continued to fly.

And it is of one of the 791 who had fought in the Battle of Britain and who were killed later in the War whom I remember at this time – his name was John Graham, and he was killed a year after the Battle of Britain. John came from my home town of Johnstone. He was the second son in a family of two boys and two girls. John's father was a gardener at Quarrier's Homes, the Orphan Homes at Bridge of Weir. He signed up for combat when he was 19, the year the War broke out and very soon he was flying spitfires and other fighter aircraft in the early days of combat. He was one of the many Scottish airmen who fought the Nazis, and he survived the Battle of Britain.

A year later, he went out on a sortie over the North Sea, and he never returned. To this day, no one knows what happened to him or his aircraft, but news came to his parents at their home in Johnstone that he was missing, presumed dead. He was 22.

And I remember when I was a wee boy asking my mother why Mrs Graham who sat in the pew behind us in the Church was crying on Remembrance Sunday as we recalled the sacrifice of the sailors and soldiers and airmen who had died during the Second World War. When the service was over, my mother took me to the beautiful stained glass window in the Church which had been erected to commemorate the men and women of the congregation who had died in the conflict. And there she pointed out the name of "John Graham, RAF". That was the reason that dear old Mrs Graham was weeping – she remembered her boy who didn't come back home.

If you go up to Ayr Cemetery or to the little cemetery at Fisherton, you will see the rows of gravestones marking the resting places of young men from Australia and New Zealand and Canada, some only 19 years of age, who joined the RAF and fought for this country and who gave their lives, and we are the benefactors of the peace and the freedoms which they established within these shores of our tiny islands.

Why should you and I hold these anniversaries? – well, we do not simply look back and remember for the sake of it, but with a view to learning the lessons of the past; we look back too with immense gratitude to the ordinary people who sacrificed so much for those who, like us, came after them; we look back remembering those who continue to give their lives in the armed forces today; we look back so that, if possible, peace can be preserved, but if necessary, evil is confronted before it is allowed to get out of hand. The lessons of the past are too important to be forgotten.

The Scriptures remind us that remembering our history is crucial – remembering its heroes, with their flaws and mistakes, but also remembering those who are too often forgotten, the countless others who contributed, as well as civilians tragically affected by war.

Because, you see, there is a war on today. Not with an enemy wearing swastikas on their armbands, but with a darkness and a poison and an evil that pervade our society at so many levels – greed, dishonesty, prejudice, hatred, contempt, and all that seeks to warp our lives.

And, however strongly the poison flows, however dark things may seem, however powerful the enemy may appear, we can take heart that victory is sure.

It is certain because Jesus is the One in Whom there is no darkness at all, no poison, no evil; in Whom there is only life and light and strength and peace.

That is the reason that St Nicholas Church was built – to point to Him 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.

He is the reason that darkness loses.

And so, as His followers, we ask ourselves – what kind of person am I? Am I a person of peace? Am I someone who will not be driven by greed and revenge and duplicity and who will not be readily taken it by those who are? Will I remember the teaching of our Lord that we are to be peacemakers, all of us children of the same Heavenly Father?

A few years ago in my German Class at school, I heard from our teacher how the older members of her family – a delightful church going family in Heidelberg – had thought, early in Hitler's career, that Hitler was so ridiculous that the only appropriate thing to do was to ignore him. When they found out their mistake, it was too late.

Constant vigilance and a consistently critical habit of mind are absolutely essential for every Christian who wants to pursue all that makes for peace and builds up our common life.

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