

Battle of Britain Sunday, 18th September 2016. Canongate Kirk.

Saints and heroes.

Last week began with a series of military services that was unusual even by our own standards. On Monday evening Peter led a service from the war memorial chapel for 142 Sqn Air Training Corps both in anticipation of this weekend's commemoration of the Battle of Britain and acknowledgement that the young people would be required to be on parade up the road in St Giles Cathedral this morning. The following evening I hosted a service here in Canongate to mark the 200th anniversary of the Scottish Naval, Military and Air Force Bible Society. The Moderator of the General Assembly was present and the address was given by General the Lord Dannatt, formerly Chief of the Defence Staff and Constable of the Tower of London. The organisation was founded in Edinburgh Castle in 1816 as the Scottish Naval and Military Bible Society and just over a hundred years later and just under a hundred years ago when men had learned to fight and fly at the same time, the Royal Air Force was included in its remit. And so for the last two hundred years men and women of the Navy, the Army and the Royal Air Force have been served by the Scottish Naval Military and Air Force Bible Society and supplied with copies of the Scriptures both in peacetime and in times of war and conflict.

In the wider ecclesiastical calendar beyond the immediate commitments of Canongate Kirk, Wednesday saw the feast of the Holy Cross, or as the Russian Orthodox calls it rather more poetically the Feast of the Exaltation of the most precious and life-giving cross. But we do have a link with that too, since it was on the feast of the Holy Cross, 14th September 1128, that our parish was formed by King David I and the idea of the abbey of the holy rood, or holy cross, first began to take shape at the foot of what we now call the Royal Mile. And finally in this rundown of the week, Friday was the day on which St Ninian, Bishop of Galloway and Apostle of the Picts, is traditionally remembered, 16th September the day he died in or around the year 432AD. So it has been a week with more strands than usual to weave into a sermon. The Navy, the Army and the Air Force. The Holy Cross and St Ninian. Saints and heroes.

Today, Battle of Britain Sunday, is always held on the first Sunday after 15th September, and commemorates the great victory won by the Royal Air Force, which saved Britain from invasion in 1940. To the Luftwaffe the Battle of Britain was known as Das Kanalkampf, the battle, the struggle for the Channel. The plan was simply to eliminate the Royal Air Force both in the air and on the ground and thus make a seaborne invasion not only possible but straightforward, parting the waters of the English Channel as easily as Moses and the people of Israel crossing the Red Sea. Confident of success, the gathered formations of the Luftwaffe along the French and Belgian coasts began their first heavy onslaught early in July, directed against British shipping and the channel ports. The intention of this first phase of the battle was to draw our Air Force into action and wear down its strength. The second phase, in mid August, consisted of intensive operations against coastal radar stations and fighter airfields. The third phase began after a five-day lull with increased night-time attacks on the fighter airfields in the London area. The daylight assault on London itself marked the beginning of the fourth phase, which opened on 7th September with attacks on the docks, which, although serious in themselves, brought relief to the fighter airfields which had been under such pressure. This phase lasted for most of the

month but reached a climax on 15th September, when over one thousand sorties were flown against the capital in the afternoon and night.

At the beginning of the battle, the Luftwaffe had no less than 2790 aircraft at its disposal. To meet this aerial armada, we had 650. Between 24th August and 6th September alone, Fighter Command lost 103 pilots killed and 128 seriously wounded, while 366 planes had been put out of action. The position was perilous. Then on Sunday 15th September came what Sir Winston Churchill called “one of the decisive battles of the war” and with it the Luftwaffe’s greatest defeat. In Churchill’s immortal words, “The gratitude of every home in our island, in our Empire and indeed, throughout the world, except in the abodes of the guilty, goes out to the British airmen who, undaunted by the odds, unwearied in their constant challenge and mortal danger, turned the tide of the world war by their prowess and their devotion. Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.”

When King David famously won his own battle with the stag in what we now know as Holyrood Park on 14th September 1128, phrases like “undaunted by the odds” and “constant challenge and mortal danger” might well have been similarly applied. But his prayers were answered, his life was spared and the seeds of the Abbey of the Holyrood and the very parish of Canongate were sown. And exactly the same could be said of St Ninian, arriving on our shores to turn the tide and preach the Gospel so many centuries before, against all the odds and at considerable personal risk. Saints and heroes.

It was the preaching and provision of the same Gospel that inspired the founding of the Scottish Naval and Military Bible Society in 1816, and when in 1918 they added the Royal Air Force to their remit they were only reflecting what actually happened with the Scriptures themselves over the centuries. When the New Testament was added to the Old Testament. When the new way of thinking and living and loving and believing that was brought by Jesus of Nazareth was included and incorporated into the Bible. In today’s Gospel reading we got the merest glimpse of how new and radical his teaching was, his insight into faith and honesty, his interpretation of wealth and riches. “The Pharisees,” St Luke tells us, “who were lovers of money, heard all this and they ridiculed him.” In a sense they represented the Old Testament and the old way of thinking and doing, and they could see how Jesus could and would turn it all on its head in his mission to encourage others above all else to serve God and to hear his Word. Even in the Navy, the Army and the Air Force.

*Praise him for his grace and favour
To our fathers in distress;
Praise him, still the same for ever,
Slow to chide and swift to bless;
Praise him! Praise him!
Praise him! Praise him!
Glorious in his faithfulness.*

And now may God in his faithfulness bless to us this preaching of his most holy word, and to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be all praise and glory now and forever. Amen.