

Memorial for Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II & Battle of Britain Service

18th September 2022

Bishop Martyn

It's an honour to be here today to take part in this very significant service. As with the Lord Lieutenant, I have been at a number of events over the past week in different parts of the city of Leicester and the county of Leicestershire. And I felt it important to be here in Melton Mowbray today, one of our most historic towns, to join you in paying tribute to her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, and in commemorating the Battle of Britain.

I want to begin by saying thank you to all those in this church and town who have been involved in the events of this last week responding to the very sad news of the death of her Majesty Queen Elizabeth. It has been quite extraordinary to watch the outpouring of grief across not just this nation but the world. And our churches, mosques, temples, and gurdwaras all have a vital part to play in helping people in this time of grief. So thank you for all you have been doing.

And perhaps like me you have found yourself transfixed by the images of people queueing, in some cases for 24 hours, to pay their last respects to the Queen. I've had it on livestream, and simply watching people's faces as they enter the hush of Westminster Hall and then process past her coffin, has been a visual reminder of just how much the Queen meant to us. Whether we met her in person or not, she has been a source of inspiration and encouragement, an example of service and dedication to duty, a symbol of stability and continuity in a rapidly changing world, and a constant reminder that faith and Christian values are what has shaped this country in the past and must be the foundation on which we build in the future.

There is so much for which we give thanks to God, and tomorrow's funeral service will be the biggest act of thanksgiving and collective grief that our country has ever known.

And in this service today we remember in particular her connections with the Armed Services. She was the first female member of the Royal Family to serve full-time in the Armed Services when, in 1945, she joined the Auxiliary Territorial Services or ATS, where she learnt to drive a Land Rover, and to maintain it as a mechanic. But it should also be remembered that she had a very close bond with families of service men and women, given how many members of her own family have served in different ways. In 2009 she instituted the Elizabeth Cross, a medal given to the families of service men and women killed in action.

And in 2018, when the RAF celebrated its centenary, she spoke publicly of her own memories of the Battle of Britain – watching the planes fly over London as the Battle

unfolded. So today, even as we remember her late Majesty, so too we honour the lives of those who fought in that most significant of battles.

Alan Allport in his book titled *Britain at Bay*, says this:

“They were barely men at all. Of the 2937 RAF airman who flew in the Battle of Britain most were under 26. To be ‘young’ meant under 22. Almost 600 (that’s 20%) were non-British the majority of these from the dominions and Empire although they were also 145 emigree Poles and 88 Czechs.”

And he goes to explain how, in contrast to the popular picture of dog-fighting planes, the reality was quite different:

“In practice most fledgling pilots lost any sense of situational awareness within seconds of entering the battle space, no matter what they were trying to do. The tremendous speed of the aircraft made it almost impossible to follow what was going on. A fighter moving at 300 mph will travel a mile in 12 seconds. A spec on the horizon would be at point blank range within half a minute, then would vanish with a blink of an eye. After entering a mad melee of perhaps 100 twisting and diving aircraft, all most pilots could do was try to avoid colliding with anyone and take a few frantic shots at which ever enemy machine filled their sights for an instant. It was an unequal fight, divided between a tiny number of expert hunters who did most of the killing and the rest who spent most of their time trying not to get killed. Only 15% of fighter pilots ever shot down another aircraft during the battle.”

Today, then, we honour the courage of these men, and all those who supported them. In her 1981 Christmas broadcast, the late Queen spoke of courage in these words:

“There are, of course, many aspects of courage. There is the physical courage shown in war. Chesterton described it as "almost a contradiction in terms..... a strong desire to live taking the form of a readiness to die". It is sobering and inspiring to remember what man will do for an ideal in which he believes.”

And she went on: “Bravery of this kind is shown in peace as well as in war. The armed forces and the police are showing it every day. So are the fire services, ambulance drivers, members of the public and even children - and the courage of the bomb disposal experts fills us with awe. All around us we see these acts of selflessness, people putting the life of someone else before their own.”

And on another occasion, she said: "When life seems hard, the courageous do not lie down and accept defeat; instead, they are all the more determined to struggle for a better future."

And so today, my simple prayer is that we may be inspired by the courage of few who fought in the Battle of Britain and the courage of our late Sovereign Lady. She faced struggles of a very different sort throughout her long reign and it is absolutely that case, that she gave her everything to work for a better future.

Our daily struggles will also take many different forms – from physical or mental illness, to worries over money and the rising cost of living, to concerns for family or friends. Tackling these struggles also takes real courage – we all know the temptation to lie down and accept defeat.

And yet Jesus could say, in the reading we heard a moment ago, “I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” It was Jesus’ knowledge that he was never alone, that his Father in heaven was always with him, that gave him the courage to face death and the loneliness which came when all his friends deserted him. And this same promise remains true for us – we are never alone, even in that moment when we ourselves will face death – and we know for sure that day will come for each of us – but even then, we will not be alone.

In her later years, the Queen spoke ever more openly about her own faith and how it sustained her in all the many challenges she faced. So as we reflect on her life, so may we too be filled with courage and with faith as we face an uncertain future. May we know that whatever our circumstances, we are not alone. May we know, in the words of the hymn which we are soon to sing “God is our strength and refuge, our present help in trouble; and we therefore will not fear, though the earth should change!

+Martyn Leicester