

Views from the Pews – The Battle of Britain

Ever so often I get e-mails from the Anglican Pacifist Fellowship, inviting me to participate in workshops and conferences promoting peace. I find these invitations slightly confronting in the run-up to the annual commemoration of the Battle of Britain.

For the Battle was won anything up to five years prior to 1940, and here is why; a group of politicians, civil servants, military people and scientists and engineers had decided – often independently of each other – that Hitlerism would not be stopped by diplomacy. In other words, a Plan B was required, which involved forcible resistance. Thus it was that radar was developed, a new range of monoplane fighters was ordered, and the means of co-ordinating aerial forces by radio was designed. A new ring of advanced fighter aerodromes was built. Without this courage and discernment, the Battle of Britain would not have been fought, let alone prove decisive in the use of modern technology.

All this when the political tide favoured appeasement. Military historians are agreed that but for this 5-year programme, disaster would have ensued.

We pass the peace every Sunday, we offer it to friend and to stranger in the next pew. Peace was Jesus' watchword when hotheads advocated rebellion against the Romans.

So where does the Battle of Britain fit into Christian thinking? Is it just an opportunity for reflection on sacrifice, and opportunity to give thanks for the defeat of tyranny?

Or is it an example of how varied and diverse the Christian toolbox is? Peace, discernment, and courage are all Christian virtues, and sometimes they must be balanced against each other; a difficult task indeed. Nor is this purely a matter of history. The Ukrainian war presents exactly the same conundrum; when is peacefulness wrong? Where do you draw the line? Which species of monster requires forceful resistance, and what must we do to prepare such resistance? Battle of Britain Day is a day of thankfulness and reflection but is also an opportunity for debate. When do you pick up the phone and order a new weapon which is designed to kill?

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