

20th September 2026 Battle of Britain Service - Rev. Yin-An Chen

(Ecclesiasticus 44.1-14, Psalm 46, Hebrews 12. 1-6, 12-14)

Every grave holds more than a name and two dates. It holds a life once lived, people once loved, and hopes once carried.

That truth comes particularly close to us at St Luke's. In our churchyard lie young airmen who served during the Battle of Britain. Their graves remind us that the Battle of Britain is not merely a national story preserved in books and museums. Its human cost is written into the ground around us.

Today we honour their courage and mourn the lives cut short. But Christian remembrance asks more of us than gratitude for the past. It asks what we will do with the freedom their generation helped to preserve.

Our readings do not give us a simple celebration of military strength. Psalm 46 speaks of nations raging and kingdoms shaking. Yet its hope is that God "makes wars to cease in all the world"; that God breaks the bow and shatters the spear. Hebrews tells us to run with perseverance, to strengthen tired hands and weak knees, and finally to "pursue peace with everyone."

So how can we honour those who fought while hearing God's call to peace?

We begin by recognising that resisting aggression and pursuing peace are not necessarily opposites. Sometimes peace is threatened because one nation, ruler or movement seeks to dominate another. In 1940, Britain faced a Nazi regime built upon dictatorship, racial supremacy, territorial conquest, and the systematic persecution and murder of Jewish people, Roma, disabled people, LGBTQ+ people, political opponents and other minorities. Failure to resist it would not have produced true peace. It would have allowed oppression to advance.

We face this question wherever people are attacked, occupied or denied the right to live in freedom and safety. We see it in Ukraine, where people continue to resist invasion. We see it in Palestine, where civilians have endured devastating loss, displacement and destruction, and where a just peace must uphold both Palestinian freedom and Israeli security. We see it also in Sudan, Myanmar, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and in other wars which receive far less attention.

These conflicts are not identical, and none should be forced too easily into the story of 1940. But they confront us with the same moral question: *Will we value every human life equally?* Our concern cannot be determined by nationality, race, religion or political convenience. True peace cannot be built upon invasion, terrorism, occupation, collective punishment, forced displacement or the denial of another people's humanity. It requires justice, security and freedom for all.

We may disagree honestly about military action and government policy. Nevertheless, we cannot be indifferent when people's homes, freedom and dignity are attacked. Peace-making requires courage: courage to resist aggression, courage to negotiate, courage to protect civilians, and courage to imagine a future in which enemies may cease to be enemies.

But the Battle of Britain teaches us something else. Britain was not defended by British-born pilots alone. Those who served came from Poland, Czechoslovakia, across the Commonwealth and from other nations. Some had already lost their own countries to occupation. They came as allies, exiles and refugees, and helped defend a land that had become their place of safety.

Nor was victory achieved by pilots alone. It depended upon ground crews, engineers, factory workers, station operators, medics, and countless others - women and men, many of whose names are no longer widely remembered. Ecclesiasticus speaks not only of famous people, but also of those who left no celebrated name, whose faithful deeds have not been forgotten by God.

This history should make us careful about whom we call an 'outsider'.

In Britain today, fear is too easily directed towards foreigners and minority communities. Economic hardship, insecure housing and struggling public services are real. But when frustration is turned against asylum seekers, Muslims, Jewish people, people of colour or anyone judged not to belong, we repeat one of humanity's oldest and most dangerous mistakes: Finding a vulnerable group to blame for problems they did not create.

We should remember that some of those we honour today were once foreigners arriving in our country. They spoke with different accents and carried the grief of countries they had been forced to leave. Yet their courage became part of Britain's story.

The freedom defended in 1940 cannot mean freedom only for people who look like us, or were born near us. If freedom is real, it must include the neighbour whose language, ethnicity or faith is different from our own. Racism and scapegoating do not protect the nation. They damage the very freedom and belonging that so many sacrificed to preserve.

Hebrews speaks of a "great cloud of witnesses." Those buried here may become witnesses to us - not calling us to romanticise war, but asking whether we have the courage required in our own time.

Will we resist aggression without learning to love violence?

Will we pursue peace without abandoning those who are oppressed?

Will we challenge hatred when it targets our neighbours?

Will we make room for those seeking safety?

Will we remember the famous while also honouring the forgotten?

Those who came before us defended a future they would not live to see. We are living in that future now.

The question is therefore not only whether we remember their sacrifice. The question is: **What shall we do with the freedom they entrusted to us?**

In the name of the Father, who created every person in love; the Son, who reconciles us across every division; and the Holy Spirit, who gives us courage to resist evil and become peacemakers. Amen.