

SERMON at Choral Evensong Truro Cathedral 16<sup>th</sup> September ( Battle of Britain Sunday) 2018 by Canon John Halkes, *Canon Emeritus*

Isaiah chapter 40 verse 31

*‘those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary they shall walk and not faint’*

Tonight we celebrate within a restrained and reflective, choral evensong we acknowledge two momentous events in the life of our nation and a significant event in the life of this cathedral. Its modesty as a service underscores our thanksgivings without triumphalism, our national rejoicing is within the quiet contemplation of the Lord our God -upon whom, we wait.

So tonight, we embrace three themes – each of dedication:

- First - there is thanksgiving for our nation’s survival in the Battle of Britain in 1940. We honour ‘ the few’ and all those who served in Fighter Command in our hour of need.
- Second - we mark the centenary of the Royal Air Force, itself a young service in that battle a service, which has played a major part around the world in the defence of this country, and continues to do so today.
- Third --we dedicate tonight for our cathedral a sculpture by Michael Finn, himself a wartime pilot in the RAF and who, post-war, became an innovate art educator and revered artist here in Cornwall. The sculpture is in the form of a cross/ crucifix – the central symbol of our faith. This sculpture was acquired through the vision of Canon Philip Lambert, the Canon Missioner in 2011, who wished that it might be placed in St Monica’s chapel as a focus of prayers for peace in our world.

But it might seem odd to some people that we celebrate in this cathedral, a sacred place dedicated to the Prince of Peace , an armed service and a victory in battle. But we are reminded by the theologian and sociologist the Rev Prof David Martin that,

*“this is a place set apart as holy and inviolate, because here the past is stored, the dead received and honoured, the living blessed, the great codes held up, the sinful released....*

*Our understanding of the resplendent powers of good is centred here. Here the transcendent life of order confronts the chaotic order of our life.”*

Transcendent goodness confronting chaos. A sustaining thought.

For Christians, this paradox of the love of God and the violence of humanity is one that has to be lived with, worked through and offered up. Our human frailty needs to be understood: indeed, we need to search within ourselves and acknowledge the power we hold. And this was the theme of this year’s BBC Reith Lectures given by the distinguished historian Professor Margaret MacMillan, entitled “ *Humanity and War- The Mark of Cain?*”

She highlighted the delicate balance between violence and justice and she asked searching questions about whether war is intrinsic to humanity and whether there has ever been a peaceful time in human history.

*She said: If you want to build a lasting peace what you have to do is build that capacity for understanding and a willingness to reach across your own preconceptions and your own assumptions to understand what others are thinking and feeling.*

But she also spoke about war as a confrontation of good against evil -and this is not always comfortable for us Christians. But we do serve the God of justice, to keep the world free from tyranny and oppression and safe from those who have turned to violence to achieve dominance over the weak, the vulnerable and the poor.

So it is right to honour the deeds of the heroic men and women who fought for our freedom from Nazi tyranny during the Battle Britain, represented here tonight by Dr Helen Doe whose father, Wg Cdr Bob Doe DSO DFC and bar, flew as a very young man in that battle. And we remember our Cornish neighbour Sqn Ldr Geoffrey Wellum DFC – a BoB ace who, among the last of ‘the few’, died at Mullion earlier this year aged 96.

And we offer our gratitude for the inspirational courage of the men and women of the Royal Air Force serving to preserve our freedoms over the past 100 years. ( AVM John Feesey representing the RAF tonight and I were both contemporaries in the RAF and later in the parishes of Lanteglos and Lansallos ) But as we offer to God our thanks we realise that he constantly challenges us through the sacrifice of the cross not to be triumphant but understand how we might bring peace to the world.

To flesh out this challenge and to understand the human condition-there is a chilling serendipity to today’s date. Remember the Battle of Britain ended in mid-September 1940- but on 16 September 1944 -exactly 74 years ago Michael Finn was on standby with his squadron to fly as a pilot in a huge airborne operation into Northern Holland – operation Market Garden. Ostensibly to expedite the end of the war.

On 17 September he flew in the first wave dropping British paratroops near Arnhem. On day 2 the element of surprise had been lost and the second wave came under heavy fire from the ground. By day 3 on a vital re-supply drop the German SS and Wehrmacht were fully re-enforced and Michael -laconically records in his log book ‘resupply heavy flak - aircraft hit’. Even the hardened troops of the airborne division were impressed at the courage of the pilots maintaining a steady track at low level through hellish fire. Michael witnessed friends and colleagues being shot down in flames.

He survived that ill-fated operation and the following airborne offensive in Battle of the Rhine in 1945 which, although more successful, was still very bloody. Michael saw and experienced things we cannot imagine.

He relied on his faith. As a thoughtful practising Roman Catholic he was attracted by the war time writings of the philosopher, theologian and reformer Simone Weil (*died 1943*) whose books, especially '*Waiting on God*' influenced the religious outlook of the generations of the immediate post war period. She wrote,

*For, if he (Man) remains constant, what he will discover buried deep under the sound of his own lamentations is the pearl of the silence of God.*

Also in the post war period of 'trying to make sense' of what had happened there was the influential ambiguity of the poet T S Eliot, and this perhaps is summed up best in a passage from his Four Quartets (1944) which spoke to the imagination of the times.

*I said to my soul be still and wait without hope.  
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love  
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith  
**But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.***

*Wait without thought for you are not yet ready for thought:  
**So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.***

For Michael and many sensitive men and women of that generation Rhetoric was to be replaced by the ambiguity of abstraction in art, poetry and music. The old order and certainties were to be challenged.

*Simone Weil had written, 'with beauty in art .. the world points to something beyond itself. Divine reality invades our lives.'*

This, perhaps, was Michael Finn's manifesto and pre-occupation as he returned to his art studies, became an educator and artist, and to his joy brought up a family.

But the world turned out to be dangerous still. The threat of nuclear war and the abomination of the arms race overshadowed much of life. Michael hated nuclear weapons and thirsted for peace. He gave his war medals to be sold in aid of an arts charity. The encyclical of Pope John in 1963 *Pacem in Terris* had set the agenda for human rights, justice for women, workers, equality and for diplomacy in a fast changing society, -not just for Roman Catholics but for the world. The encyclical is lodged permanently in the UN and deserves critical reading.

Michael never saw himself as a religious artist – but increasingly in his art he practised what he prayed. Echoes of the late parish priest and theologian Alan Eccleston-(excuse the dated exclusive language)

*'a man is what he prays'.*

So he painted and constructed art as meditation and prayer. Seeking in the simplicity of form and the density of colour the complexity of human emotion. His sculptured crosses and crucifixes eschewed the commonplace iconography of representation to allow the onlooker into the mystery of the cross.

That is why this cross which will be in St Monica's chapel has such integrity and will complement the Calvary of Craigie Aitcheson in St Margaret's chapel. Michael Finn

respected the work of Craigie Aitcheson and would have been honoured to be nearby.

His daughter Christine remembered:

*Father's Catholic faith had always been very important to him, and he would reiterate that the over-riding value in life was love, both of God and one's neighbour.*

His life was a life of love in action.

His example; the courage of the Battle of Britain air and groundcrew; the commitment to justice and peace by the RAF: all combine to help us rise and pledge our word as we too wait on God in service to Christ the King of Peace.