

Remembrance Sunday

9 11 08

Almighty and eternal God
from whose love in Christ we cannot be parted,
either by death or life
hear our prayers and thanksgivings
for all whom we remember this day
fulfil in them the purpose of your love:
and bring us all, with them, to your eternal joy

My text for Remembrance Sunday is John 15 and verse 13, 'No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.'

Monday 15th September was Battle of Britain Day and the Church Times of the previous weekend ran an article entitled 'Lines Composed in a Spitfire'. The article, written by Patrick Murphy, commemorates John Gillespie Magee, a 19-year-old Spitfire pilot serving with the Royal Canadian Air Force who died in November 1941.

Born in China in 1922, John was the eldest child of four of the Revd John Magee, a Protestant Episcopalian missionary. His mother was British and worked for CMS (The Church Missionary Society). 'As a boy', Patrick Murphy writes, 'John was vivacious, charming and full of mischief. He had a keen and enquiring mind and at an early age raised theological questions with his kindly father. It seemed faith would not come blindly to him.'

He was educated at Rugby School like his well-known predecessor, Rupert Brooke, the soldier poet famous for the sonnet, 'If I should die think only this of me that there is some corner of a foreign field that is forever England'. Like Brooke, John Magee won the School's coveted poetry prize. He actually privately published a book of his verse which he wrote between the age of 13 and 16 and which was largely inspired by his love for the daughter of one of his teachers. It is not sure who she was exactly and Magee refers to her only as Diana which suggests the nature of his love for her. Sadly, he died still a young man but will be remembered for an excellent sonnet, 'High Flight' published posthumously.

'High Flight' is justly famous and is the official poem of the RCAF as well as the RAF. It is often recited at Remembrance Day services at the Cenotaph and in the United States, trainee pilots are required to learn it by heart. Amazingly, when the Challenger Space Shuttle exploded in 1986 shortly after take-off, President Regan ended his television broadcast to a shocked nation with this paraphrase of part of the poem: 'they have slipped the surly bonds of earth to touch the face of God'. Powerful stuff so let me recite the poem and you can judge the whole for yourself

High Flight

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth
 And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
 Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
 Of sun-split clouds, – and done a hundred things
 You have not dreamed of – wheeled and soared and swung
 High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,
 I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
 My eager craft through footless halls of air. . .

Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
 I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace.
 Where never lark nor even eagle flew –
 And, while with silent lifting mind I've trod
 The high untrampled sanctity of space,
 Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

Magee captures not only the freedom and delight of flying so wonderful an aircraft as a Spitfire but also communicates a convincing sense of the divine which seems tangible. Alone in the sky, Magee is not alone for he senses an otherness underpinning 'these footless halls of air', 'the untrampled sanctity of space'.

His poem makes me want to cry; to cry for all those who gave their lives that the evil embodied in Nazi Germany might be overcome. It was but not without large-scale loss of life.

The perennial sacrifice in the unending battle of goodness against life-denying evil is embodied in the Incarnation of Jesus and realised in his Crucifixion. I can, therefore, repeat with confidence today's text: 'No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends'.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
 Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist
 St Bartholomew's Dinard
 9th November, 2008*

