

High Flight

13 11 16

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 untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

John Gillespie Magee

Our text may be found in today's gospel and is Luke 21 v31:

'Nation will rise up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.'

Today is Remembrance Sunday and our text from Luke's gospel is part of the teaching of Jesus about signs of the end times, a time of war when nation will rise up against nation, kingdom against kingdom, state against state. Warfare is as old as history and conflict somewhere in the world is part of our daily news. But let us, today on Remembrance Sunday, reflect once again on the cost of standing up for what is right, the cost of defending ourselves against militant evil. And to

do so, I'd like again to take a poem, this time one written by a young Spitfire pilot from the Second World War to help us to appreciate the value of such sacrifice made for us by those who fight for us which Dr David Norris will now read to us.

Born in China in 1922, John Gillespie Magee was the eldest of four of the Revd John Magee, an American Episcopalian missionary, and Faith Backhouse, a British woman who worked for The Church Missionary Society. As a boy, John was vivacious, charming and full of mischief. He had a keen and enquiring mind and he loved asking his patient father hard, theological questions. His was not a blind faith.

Like Rupert Brooke, he was educated at Rugby School. Like Brooke, John Magee won the School's poetry prize. He actually published privately a book of his verse which he wrote between the age of 13 and 16. Sadly, he was only 19 when his plane was brought down on 11th December 1941 but he will be remembered for his sonnet you've just heard, 'High Flight' that was published posthumously.

'High Flight' 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.

Why is 'High Flight' special? For the way the sonnet expresses the pure delight of flight. I'm told how good a plane to fly a Spitfire was and, in a series of verbs, Magee shares the thrill of being up in the air, up in the clouds, on a real high: 'danced, climbed, joined, wheeled, soared, swung, hov'ring, chased, flung,

topped, trod'. The motion is breathless and exciting, a young man's dream of being aware, awake, alive to the marvel that surrounds him. On laughter-silvered wings – real joy and joie de vivre in the tumbling mirth of sun-split clouds. It's the thought of being free, being where no foot has trod, no bird has flown. And, finally, the climax of a God-encounter when he writes:

with silent lifting mind I've trod
The high untrampled sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

This Remembrance Sunday, then, let us simply remember the cost of standing up for what is right is the loss of precious lives like that of John Gillespie Magee.

May they rest in peace

And rise in glory

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

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

13th November 2016

