

## Remembrance Day 2020

On 18 June 80 years ago Winston Churchill famously told the House of Commons:

*I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin. Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilisation...*

Churchill knew that this was the hour he was born for. He had a great sense of destiny and of his own place in it – dating back to his childhood years. He was not a great practitioner of religion; he is often called agnostic, but he wasn't an agnostic in the sense that people mean it today, someone who hasn't quite their mind up whether they believe in God or not. Churchill's agnosticism wasn't a lazy indifference to religion or to the divine but an openness to different interpretations of what he thought didn't matter very much. But the heart of what he thought Christianity and the best of other religious traditions contained was for him the very essence and fabric of all that was good and noble and worthy in our history, our way of life and our culture. And it was Christian – he was a historian and saw how it was Christianity that gave to Western civilisation its core values and virtues. He read and quoted from the Bible more than any other text and saw that its message was our bedrock and that what was at stake in the second world war wasn't just a clash of national interest but a clash of rival world views. One was the true heir of Christian history – or perhaps heirs, as the secular, revolutionary in the beginning, philosophy of Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité was still grounded in the same understanding of the value of all human life, the responsibility we have for every member of society and particularly for the poor and less powerful. So secular France and America were our allies. Of course Germany was the heir of that tradition too but in the 19<sup>th</sup> century developed schools of thought that combined a social Darwinism with a revived paganism that saw certain races as superior and was disgusted by the Christian amplification of the poor, the vulnerable and the weak. Nazi ideology was at heart atheistic but in a throwback to Rome and older imperial cultures divinised good looks, breeding, power, wealth and success. It not only despised the opposite but as we know actively sought to expunge it – them – from society.

I think Churchill was right. If the Battle of Britain had not been won then more was at stake than our national sovereignty:

*if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age*

[Churchill's voice had an authority and authenticity in those dark days because he had, like some lone Old Testament prophet, spent much of the late 1930s warning this country of the dangers of Hitler and of the policy of appeasement. He was not popular. We had been through one great war and most people recoiled from the very thought of going through that sort of trauma again. Churchill urged rearmament whilst the rest of the country supported turning swords into ploughshares. He was a Jeremiah who looked at the other influencers of his day and said:

*They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying 'Peace, peace,' where there is no peace. (Jeremiah 6.14)*

In the terms of the Parable of the wise and foolish virgins, he saw that our pre-war nation was not prepared, it had no oil for its lamps; it was not ready for the coming not of the bridegroom but of the thief in the night.]

1,500 years before Churchill lived another that hindsight would view as a towering figure of his age. His theology and philosophy were the most influential in the west for the following thousand years – and perhaps is so still would that we knew it. He also lived in days when the world around him seemed to be falling apart due to foreign invasion and the collapse of the world order. In the year 410 the Visigoths led by Alaric stormed the city of Rome, the eternal city, part of the Barbarian engulfing of their recently Christianised civilisation. It was the end of the Roman Empire as they had

known it and it sunk the Western world into what Churchill called the Dark Ages. Our great hero and prophet of that period, St Augustine was Bishop of the north African city of Hippo. There he responded to the world crisis by deepening the life of prayer – he led a religious community that was almost as influential in later years as that founded by St Benedict. But he also wrote – and amongst his major theological writings was his direct reflection on the current political and cultural crisis, entitled ‘The City of God’. In it many think he lays the foundation for much later philosophical and political thought. He contrasts the human city, the city of this age – in Latin of the saeculum, the secular city - with the city of God, to which all the best of the secular city aspires to and moves towards but it is always beyond its grasp. In the terms of the hymn we have sung, this is the other country, the one we have heard of long ago, been taught about, not least by our Christian inheritance, the one whose ways are of gentleness and whose paths are peace.

In Latin, the City of God is the ‘civitas Dei’, civitas from which we get the words civic and civil and civilisation. Our whole Western understanding of civilisation comes from Augustine. In that great work he traces the history of the civitas and its significance; in fact he is the first beyond the Old Testament to give history such a dynamic and direction. The goal of the city and of civilisation is the city of God or the kingdom of God, that new reality made known to us in the life, the teaching, the death and the rising of Jesus of Nazareth.

[We have just been witnessing across the pond a great clash of two opposing political movements led by two very different men. Part of the clash of cultural swords has been about the division of those in the city – liberal, metropolitan types – and those in the countryside, rural, small town dwellers big on family values and the older ways. Evangelical Christians as well as conservative Catholics have been in the second category. Back in Augustine’s day, incidentally, it was the fashionable, metropolitan city-dwellers who were the Christians (this new religious worldview) while the rural people were known as pagani, rustic, conservative types, followers of the old religion. Strange how things move on. I must confess – perhaps I shouldn’t say it but I will – that I am much relieved that the presidency of the US will be moving from its current office-holder to another, but I think we should be careful not to dismiss the views and concerns of almost half the nation that brought him to office four years ago and nearly re-elected him this week. I hope the liberal metropolitans will learn to listen more carefully to their country cousins, for both traditions are inheritors of our Christian civilisation and so long as they both continue to admire and revere the Christian qualities of compassion, integrity, the equal rights of all people, charitable concern for the vulnerable, the pursuit of justice and the importance of marriage and other social and civil institutions that enable us to live loving and dutiful lives – then they both have, or should have, a respected place in our Western societies that are the heirs of St Augustine. We must be generous in who we give respect to in our society. We Christians must welcome and work with all people of good will, those of other faiths and those of no religious faith but who share our values. In the war that ended 75 years ago it was a whole commonwealth of nations that worked together for a common good and the preservation of a civilisation that was in danger of being overrun by a new paganism. Today we honour their memory, their sacrifice, their commitment to a noble cause and to a better, brighter future that we who follow Christ speak of as the City of God.