

Sermons, Speeches & Addresses

Battle of Atlantic – 70th Anniversary Service
May 2013



Prayer:- May the words of my mouth and the memories of hearts be an acceptable offering in your sight O Lord our strength and our Redeemer.

The Air and the Sea – these are the elements that define the character of an island nation. Their currents not only chisel the seaboard, they lick into shape the men and women, the children and families, the communities connected to their coast. Never more so than in a time of war, when the island nation is under threat of invasion. Thus in the Second World War the two theatres of conflict that continue to stir both the imagination and the pride of the nation are the battles of the air and the sea –the Battle of Britain and the Battle of the Atlantic. Lost in the mists of time is any sense of just how near to defeat the nation came in its struggle with the tyranny that was marching across Europe. Not only marching towards this island nation but sailing and flying – with fear in its wings and terror under the waves.

Crucial to the defence of the allies was the engagement of America. The King and Queen had made a successful visit to the States in 1939. It was decided that Queen Elizabeth should do a radio broadcast to the women of America in order to gain more support for the British war effort. Her Majesty and her advisers knew what every family in Liverpool knows, that whereas the women let the men think they're in charge, it's the women who really run the street! Not least because when tragedy strikes a seafaring city, it is indeed the women who hold in their arms the flock of grieving families.

In the broadcast the Queen pleaded, "To you, tyranny is as hateful as it is to us; to you the things for which we will fight to the death are no less sacred; . we fight to save a Cause that is yours no less than ours... that, however great the cost and however long the struggle justice and freedom, human dignity and kindness shall not perish from the earth".

And so it was that America came to the Cause. And through a naval line as vital as an umbilical cord the wealth of America was transfused into the Allied Body and the struggle to be free from tyranny. But as the Queen so presciently confessed, it was a sacred Cause to be defended at a cost and with lives lost in a long struggle for "justice and freedom, for human dignity and kindness." What we remember in this service is that those who bore the cost were themselves denied that "human dignity and kindness" in order that others might have it. From the Command Headquarters in Liverpool ships of the Merchant Navy sailed the Atlantic back and forth in convoys protected by ships of the Royal Navy, constantly under threat from under water – the U-boats that wreaked such devastation. 5000 ships sunk, some 80,000 crew members lost.

The writer Christopher Lee recounted how seamen talked "of the constant fear engendered by U-boats; of mangled and screaming ship mates; of recurring nightmares; of donkeymen and greasers who drank because they dreaded the prospect of a torpedo bursting into the engine room and the certain death it brought". These are the realities of the cause of freedom, this is the true cost of the Battle of the Atlantic. The ocean became a harbour for their souls so that, denied it themselves, "human dignity and kindness shall not perish from the earth".

Yet the convoys continued. Eventually the disciplined fortitude of the Merchant Navy, the strategic skills of the Royal Navy with such men as Captain Johnnie Walker, the brilliance of the Bletchley Park Codebreakers, the courageous cover offered by the Royal Air Force all combined to turn the tide against the aggressor. Winston Churchill wrote that the U-boat peril was "the only thing that really frightened him during the war". It was he who named it the Battle of the Atlantic. He of all people understood the severity of the threat and the strategic significance of the victory for this island nation. The Battle of the Atlantic was a battle for Britain.

Marbled into the human heart by the Maker of Heaven and Earth is a streak of freedom – it's an impulse that can be neither ignored nor forever suppressed. It keeps coming to the surface of human society like a drowning man coming up for breath. The human spirit was made out of the free Spirit that is God himself. A Spirit that is according to Christ as free and as unpredictable as the wind. The Spirit of freedom cannot be contained. Indeed the story of the human family told in the Bible is of a journey from enslavement to liberation when one day the whole of creation will be set free from the tyranny of evil, sin and death. And in that future final freedom there will be reconciliation - not and never with evil itself, but with all those delivered out of its dominion of darkness. Oppressors can intimidate and tyrannise, can oppress and suppress but in the end the Spirit cannot be bound in chains and will fight to be free.

That's what we commemorate here today in this Cathedral whose Chapter House became the Chapel for the Atlantic Convoy. We own the sacrifice of those that "went down to the sea in ships", who went "down again to the deep" and were "carried up to the heaven".

They did this for us, as the Queen said "that justice and freedom, human dignity and kindness shall not perish from the earth"; nor from this island nation, whose contours and character are forever shaped by both the air and the sea.

Amen

© The Bishop of Liverpool