

Jonathan Aitken Sermon for November 11
St Matthew's Westminster, 20 Great Peter Street

JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON

REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY, November 11

ST. MATTHEW'S WESTMINSTER

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This time last year at extremely short notice, I was asked to preach on Remembrance Sunday in Brixton Prison.

This was quite a challenge because there had been no Christian Chaplain in Brixton for several months. That was why I got a rather panicky telephone call from the Governor's office 24 hours before Remembrance Sunday 2017 asking me, even though I was not ordained at the time, if I could come in and lead the service as a layman.

For good measure, this military sounding voice on the line said rather firmly

"And the Governor does want a proper, formal Remembrance Day Service with a full two-minute silence".

Aye, Aye Sir, I more or less replied but with some anxiety.

I was anxious because I knew that Prison chapels are full of restless, boisterous characters. Their congregation often have mixed motives for coming to Chapel. They are not always good at keeping silences – certainly not for as long as 2 minutes.

Despite my anxieties as things turned out this time last year we had in Brixton prison as moving and as respectful a Remembrance Sunday Service as I can ever remember attending.

Now the credit for this really went to my late father. He in 1940 was Flight Lieutenant Bill Aitken, an RAF fighter pilot flying a Spitfire in the Battle of Britain. I always think of him as Remembrance Sunday approaches and just before I was setting off to Brixton Prison I recalled that hanging up in the back of my clothes cupboard was my father's RAF flying jacket which I have kept for sentimental reasons.

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Suddenly by some flash of sartorial inspiration I had the idea of taking the flying jacket along to the prison chapel.

Soon after the Service began I asked a young Caribbean prisoner who must have been all of 19 or 20 years old if he would wear the flying jacket, to help illustrate the meaning of Remembrance Sunday.

By good fortune this young prisoner was a natural actor and performer bursting with enthusiasm to be on stage.

He might have been a young Richard Todd playing Guy Gibson in *The Dam Busters*. So with the only slightest prompting from me this young man clad in my father's flying jacket was performing all the aerial movements and giving commands of a Spitfire pilot.

Chocks away,

Hard on the joystick

Climbing left

Jinking right

Going into a dive to avoid the Hun in the sun

And then chunkly clank clanking

Into a Dog fight with his attack machine gun blazing (imitate all these)

His fellow prisoners loved his performance and so did I. My father's flying jacket had turned out to be a marvellous prop.

Incidentally, I loaned it this morning to the Junior Church so that one or two of the children can wrap themselves up in the flying jacket. It might give them a feeling on Remembrance Sunday of what it was like to be an RAF fighter pilot keeping warm against the cold chill of the skies above Kent in the 1940s in the cockpit of a Spitfire.

Getting back to HMP Brixton, when the chapel quietened down from the natural actor's aerobatics and histrionics I was able to tell that by now silent congregation of prisoners something about my father – why he was wearing that jacket in combat.

I will spend a couple of minutes telling you something about my father too.

I think you will be surprised to hear, and if my father is listening in to this sermon from his celestial perch, I am sure he will be amazed to hear that there is a connection between his story and today's Gospel.

In 1939 my father, Bill Aitken was a rising young Canadian executive working in a Bank in Toronto. He had good career prospects. Until one day he read an article in the Toronto Globe newspaper which reported that a war between Germany and England was imminent.

It also reported that the biggest worry for the Royal Air Force was that it was desperately short of trained pilots.

Now my father was a pilot. He had learned to fly in a Canadian Territorial Army Regiment called the Toronto Scottish Highlanders.

So after reading the article and believing that the "Mother Country" (as he called it) was in danger because of a shortage of pilots. My father sent off a letter of application and a copy of his pilot's licence addressed to the RAF Recruiting Officer, Air Ministry London.

And he got a letter back saying yes, we would like to have you in the RAF. Come on over.

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So, my father walked out of his job and came over to London and he was commissioned into one of the first RAF fighter Squadrons in 1939, and he was soon in action.

I won't go into detail about my father's war record. It was a good one and a lucky one for he did not get killed as so many of his fellow RAF pilots did.

But he did pay a heavy sacrifice as he was shot down, and so badly burned that he had to undergo over 40 plastic surgery operations as a "guinea pig" in the Burn's Unit of East Grinstead hospital where the operations were done by the legendary surgeon Archibald McIndoe, the father of plastic surgery.

But my father did live to tell the tale – except that like so many of those World War veterans he did not like talking about his war record or why he got his medals.

However, one day as a teenage son I asked my father

"Dad why did you give up your job and career in Canada to volunteer for the RAF?"

And after a long rather embarrassed pause my father replied in his broad Canadian accent

"Wal, I guess I just felt called to do my bit".

Now that was a call felt not just by my father but by thousands of young "sons of the Empire" as they were known.

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In both World Wars, those Australians, New Zealanders, South Africans and Canadians and citizens of other Commonwealth countries spontaneously volunteered to service the Crown in England's Armed Forces. They were not conscripted. They simply felt called to do their bit.

Such calls are mysterious. They defy rational explanation. They emerge from the deepest well springs of the human heart.

And such calls are not, of course, limited to patriotic military service.

They can be calls to vocations for careers in medicine, nursing, charity work or indeed to a life of spiritual service in the Church.

And this now brings us to today's Gospel.

In the passage read to us this morning Jesus is walking by the Sea of Galilee when he calls four or five fishermen to be his first disciples.

"Follow me" said Jesus and I will make your Fishers of Men".

The next sentence of Mark's Gospel tells us

"And immediately they left their nets and followed him".

Note that word immediately.

The speed of response to a call can indicate the power of a call.

People who are called in profound ways usually do not hang about.

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Those disciples did not finish drying their nets. My father did not hang about. He didn't say, "I'll finish Part III of my banking exams first."

Those Australians and New Zealanders who walked off their sheep farms didn't say, "Let's wait until the end of the shearing season". They spontaneously joined up.

The immediacy of response by those brave young men in 1914 and 1940 is paralleled by the immediacy of the reaction to the greatest call recorded in The Bible which took place in 547 BC, the year King Uzziah died.

For that was the year of the Call of Isaiah described in dramatic detail Chapter 6 of the Book of Isaiah.

Many of you will know it well. We are reminded of it every time we sing the Sanctus during the Mass, whose words come from Isaiah Chapter 6.

But after the high drama described in that chapter of the doorposts shaking, the temple filling up with smoke, and seraphs flying around with red hot coals singing, "Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty".

Then comes the most dramatic moment when God speaks with his call, asking the question:

"Whom shall I send and who will go for me?"

And the young Isaiah instantly responds

"Here am I send me!"

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Why? Why did Isaiah respond so instantaneously and so wholeheartedly, that he went on to become the greatest Prophet of the Old Testament.

These calls are mysteries, too deep for words and too deep for explanations. True in 547 BC – true in 1940.

But there are inexplicable elements in all our lives which do not seem to have been given to us by human hands.

For example:

Our consciences- who put them in us?

Our courage- where did it come from?

Our Calling – whose voice are we hearing?

All such cases may well be the handiwork of Almighty God.

God does not call his servants to only great endeavours such as becoming a prophet or volunteering to fight in a just war.

We rightly honour today those who responded to such calls in times of great national emergency.

But we should remember that God also calls each and every one of us to far smaller and mundane acts of service.

Let us pray that when we hear the whisper of his call we too may respond swiftly and spontaneously and whole heartedly.

"Here am I, send me".

Amen