

THE REVD JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON

Remembrance Sunday 9 November 2025



ST PETER'S NOTTING HILL

Kensington Park Rd, London W11 2PN

Ephesians 6: Verses 10-18

One of the most challenging Remembrance Day services I can ever remember took place in Brixton Prison when I was a preacher. The day before, I had a call from the prison when a military voice said on the line rather firmly: "The Governor does want a proper Remembrance Day Sunday Service with a full 2-minutes' silence."

Although I said: "Aye Aye Sir!" or words to that effect. I was worried! Because I well knew that prison chapels are full of boisterous young gangland characters with limited attention spans.

They are not much good at keeping silences certainly not for as long as 2 minutes. But then, as I was nervously setting off for the service, I had a flash of inspiration.

I was thinking about my late War hero father as I always do on Remembrance Sunday. In 1940 he was Flight Lieutenant Bill Aitken a World War II fighter pilot flying a Spitfire in The Battle of Britain. And I remembered that at the back of my clothes cupboard was my father's RAF flying jacket which I keep for sentimental reasons. And in a sudden flash of inspiration, I had the idea of taking my Dad's flying jacket along to the prison chapel as a visual reminder of what Remembrance Sunday is all about. And I've done the same this morning by bringing this jacket here to St Peter's.

In Brixton Prison my father's flying jacket turned out to be a marvellous prop. 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 chunkily clank clanking into a Dog fight with his attack machine gun blazing.

His fellow prisoners loved his performance and so did I.

When the HMP Brixton Chapel quietened down from the natural actor's aerobatics, I was able to tell the prisoners something about my father. Why he was wearing this actual jacket in the Battle of Britain as vital protection against the freezing cold in a Spitfire cockpit when the aircraft was flying at 20,000 feet. The jacket also saved my father's life when he was shot down because it was made of inflammable material.

Protection, by the way, is just as important in spiritual warfare as it was in Spitfire warfare.

We'll hear about this in a moment when we connect with our Reading which opens with an exhortation from St Paul: "To put on the full armour of God". But before we go there, let me say a few more words about my father, because his story also connects in a small way with our Reading.

In 1938, my father, Bill Aitken, was a young Canadian Executive working in a Bank in Toronto. 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 England was about to lose the war because its Royal Air Force was so desperately short of trained pilots.

Now my father was a well-trained pilot. He had learned to fly in a Canadian Territorial Army Regiment called the Toronto Scottish Highlanders. He was the regiment's reconnaissance pilot.

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 volunteer's letter of application to the RAF Recruiting Officer, Air Ministry London.

After some correspondence in the summer of 1938 and paying his own fair for a transatlantic crossing ship voyage, my father presented himself at the Air Ministry in Whitehall.

He was interviewed by a Wing Commander who was impressed by his pilot's licence credentials and his number of flying hours:

"How old are you Aitken?" my father was asked.

"31, Sir."

"Have you brought your birth certificate?"

"Yes, Sir!"

"Then burn it!" ordered the Wing Commander, pointing to a fire in the grate.

And that was how my father was recruited into the RAF and given a fictional but fighter pilot qualifying age of 25 and sent off in 1938 to one of the first ever Spitfire Training Squadrons.

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My father had what was called a 'good war', but it was also a short war because in 1942 he was shot down over the North Sea by a Luftwaffe Messerschmitt.

He just got his Spitfire back over the Suffolk coast, but the aircraft was on fire and so was he. He crash landed his Spitfire and was very lucky to be pulled out alive by some early morning farm workers from the flames and

spent the next two years in the Burns Hospital at East Grinstead where he had 42 plastic surgery operations on his face as one of the guinea pigs of the legendary surgeon, Archibald McIndoe, the father of plastic surgery.

My father's legs were badly burned too. He walked with a stick for the rest of his life but he never complained but he died prematurely – partly because of his wartime injuries - when I was 21 years old.

So of course I honour him on Remembrance Sunday.

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Like so many men of his generation, my father did not talk much about his wartime service, his dogfights, his medals or his hair-raising brushes with death in the skies.

But he did admit to having been C.O. of what was called the "Foreign Crazies Squadron",

a joke RAF name for the elite Unit of international fighter pilots from: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Poland (who produced wonderful fighter pilots), South Africa, the USA and Malta and other parts of the world who came here to serve in our RAF.

None of them were conscripted. They were all volunteers. They were remarkable men. And often had remarkable war records.

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Quite late in his life when I was a teenager, I once asked my father:

"Dad, why did you give up your job and your career in Toronto to fly for the RAF?"

After a rather embarrassed pause, my father replied in his broad Canadian accent:

"Well, I guess, like all the boys, I just wanted to do my bit."

"But why?" I persisted.

Eventually, after a taciturn grunt or two, my father said:

"Well, I kinda knew that we had to take a stand."

"We had to fight against all that damn evil that Hitler was doing."

* * *

My father's inarticulate mumbles of explanation had been expressed centuries earlier, far more articulately and powerfully, by St Paul in our Reading this morning. Just listen again to his words which, of course, are about spiritual, not military, warfare.

11 Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.

12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

13 Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.

* * *

This is St Paul at his most eloquent and his most inspirational. The great New Testament Commentator, C H Dodd, described this passage as "The Crown of Paulism". Paul is moving far beyond the horizons of a past or future war.

This is a call to each and every one of us to fight in our own lives on the battlefield of spiritual warfare. Paul is talking about the eternal and ongoing battle between good and evil. Harken on this subject to the words of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in *The Gulag Archipelago*:

*"The line separating good and evil passes not through states,
nor between classes,
nor between political parties either,
-- but right through every human heart."*

* * *

Naturally, on Remembrance Sunday, in our human hearts, we honour the physical courage and sacrifices of those who faced a tangible enemy in battle. Jesus himself praised such courage.

He said in John 5:13:

*"Greater love has no man than this,
that he lay down his life for his friends."*

Such physical courage is still necessary, although in the age of Putin it is drones rather than young Spitfire pilots who get shot down in the air.

But in this passage, Paul is using the image of a soldier's armour as a spiritual metaphor to identify the virtues which defend the soul and protect the inner life of moral character.

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There is no doubt that this famous passage from the Letter to the Ephesians is written by a great Apostle who fervently believed in the demonic and supernatural forces of evil.

Some wishy-washy modern theologians who prefer the church reticent to the church militant have mocked Paul for being far too superstitious, with his colourful references to the schemes or wiles of the devil, flaming arrows of the evil one and the spiritual forces of evil.

But such mockery seems ridiculous because Jesus, of course, knew all about the devil and his dark powers that are wicked and cunning. Just read the descriptions of Jesus' temptations by the devil in Matthew, Chapter 4: 1-11. So there is nothing fanciful about Paul's description of Satan's powers in our Reading.

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One of the devil's favourite tricks is to try and persuade us that he does not exist. That's why Paul became so passionate in warning his Ephesian readers, some of whom were known to have been dabbling in the occult, and giving such strong practical advice on how to defeat the devil when he tried to tempt them and, indeed, tempt us, in our ordinary lives today.

Paul's practical advice on defeating the devil can be broken down into three main parts.

1. "Be strong in the Lord and in His mighty powers. (Verse 10)

This is a reminder that, of course, God's strengths and God's might is infinitely more powerful than anything the devil has in his arsenal.

In our moments of human weakness, sometimes we may doubt this rock-like fact of spiritual life,

but if the devil does come near us, remember that he is easily frightened away by praying The Lord's Prayer or by simply repeating this great verse from Ephesian 6:10:

"Be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power."

2. The second piece of advice or exhortation from Paul on how to defeat the devil comes down to the old military axiom or even the Boy Scout's saying: "Be prepared".

Forget about feeble preparations like my father's flying jacket in 1940. Paul, who knew the Roman Army well, blew the trumpet of what in its day was the full kit of a Centurian, to which he added spiritual dimensions and descriptions.

The full armour of God, in Paul's words, included: A belt of truth, a breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the helmet of Salvation and the sword of the spirit. These are, of course, spiritual weapons of protection.

But as we are a Spirit-filled Church, whose members may be required to get into real fights with the devil, let's concentrate on the Sword of the Spirit (Verse 17) which Paul tells us is "the word of God".

We proclaim God's word here every day, every Sunday, here at St Peter's. But perhaps we don't always think of it as part of the Armour of God – as St Paul did.

3. Paul helpfully expands his armoury still further with one vital verse – Verse 18. This is the third exhortation and piece of advice for beating the devil.

Verse 18: "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always be praying for all the Saints."

Here I think we get to the heart of Paul's message, both for spiritual protection for the Ephesians and for spiritual protection and spiritual courage in our own lives today on this Remembrance Day in November 2025.

"Pray in the Spirit" – what does this mean?

We often do it here at St Peter's, and perhaps Pat will lead us in it this morning. But it means – praying as the Holy Spirit moves us. Today, on Remembrance Sunday, we should pray for peace.

In our troubled and dangerous world, Verse 15 of today's Reading urges us to get our **"feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the Gospel of peace."** May that readiness and this Gospel help us to prevent future wars and end present ones.

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But getting more personal may Paul's words protect us from the wiles, snares and schemes of the devil. The devil's temptations often start small and don't look all that evil in their early stages. A little cheating in the expenses or on one's partner?

Or how about puffing us up with pride – which C.S. Lewis called "the great sin" but which often begins as an unnoticed small one. These examples suggest that if you let him into your life then the devil will use a small foothold to make great gain.

But the good news is that the devil is defeatable. The ways to defeat him are set out so well, so cleverly, in today's Reading:

Be strong in the Lord, take your stand and pray in the Spirit

Use this Remembrance Sunday and follow these ancient paths and supplications – and you won't need to bother about the devil.

AMEN