I’m going to cut myself adrift from our readings from Scripture this morning, and take as my theme the Royal Air Force. Why I’m doing that should become apparent in the course of things. Don’t look for a single argument running through what follows; all I shall offer are a series of loosely related points.

To begin with, let me take you back twenty years to a German class in the University’s language centre on Woodstock Road. My German teacher’s mouth hung open. He’d just been telling us about the Berlin Airlift in 1948-9, when, in response to a Soviet blockade, the West flew in urgent supplies to the beleaguered city. He had only mentioned American efforts, so I raised my hand and contradicted him. “No,” I said, “the British were involved, too”. He looked incredulous. “Why do you say that?”, he asked. I replied, “Because my father’s brother, James, was in charge of Royal Air Force operations out of Lübeck”. That was the first he’d ever heard of British involvement.

For sure, the United States Air Force bore the brunt of the operation, delivering almost 74% of the remarkable total of 2.3 million tons of supplies. Nevertheless, the R.A.F. transported 240,000 tons of food, not far short of their American allies’ 296,000 tons. And there was one important difference: the British themselves were still surviving on rations (as they were, until the year I was born, 1955).

I don’t suppose for a moment that all of the British airmen were motivated by warm sentiment toward the Germans. After all, only a few years before, many of them would have been flying bombing sorties over Germany, in which 55,000 of their comrades—almost one in every two—had been killed. Nevertheless, if we think of love less in terms of warm, subjective sentiment and more in terms of hard, objective commitment and action, then I think we can say that the R.A.F.’s Airlift was as a magnanimous expression of love by victors toward their recently defeated enemy. So here’s my first point. Those
who say that Jesus’ command that we should love our enemies is naïve idealism are wrong. Even in the immediate wake of bitter war, it is possible.

My second point is related. This week the Church celebrated the life and work of George Bell, sometime Student of Christ Church and later Bishop of Chichester. Famously, in the 1930s Bell had cultivated relations with the Confessing Church in Nazi-Germany, and then in World War Two he had protested vigorously against the R.A.F.’s carpet-bombing of German cities. That bombing has been ethically controversial ever since, with arguments ranged on both sides. My own view is that, all things considered, periods of the bombing probably were immoral, according to the canons of the Christian tradition of thinking about the justification of war. My point here is a bit complex, and I will state it slowly: that all human endeavour is prone to be marred by sin; that even when that endeavour is justified overall, as I think the war against Hitler was, it will contain elements of immorality; but that those elements need not corrupt the enterprise as a whole. So when we come to commemorate the dead of the two world wars next month, we should allow ourselves to feel shame alongside pride.

But we should feel pride, too. In this centenary, when we commemorate the creation of the R.A.F. in 1918, it is, of course, the legendary heroism of “the Few” during the Battle of Britain that springs to mind. This was when, for four long and desperate months from early July to late October 1940, just under 3,000 fighter pilots prevented the Luftwaffe from gaining control of the skies over south-east England, and so from opening the way for invasion across the English Channel. The early phases of the battle saw mere handfuls of fighters throw themselves against hundreds of German bombers. Without their victory, Britain’s resistance to Hitler would probably have been overwhelmed, and America’s subsequent struggle made immeasurably more difficult. Retaking Europe from England proved hazardous enough in 1944; trying to retake it from the far side of the Atlantic would have been almost impossible. Hence Winston Churchill’s famous remark, “Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few”.

My uncle Jim was one of them, as I discovered only last year, decades after his death and my father’s. (Families do sometimes keep very odd secrets.) Jim, of course, was British (or, to be as precise as he’d have been, Scottish), but twenty per cent of the Few were not. They included over a hundred each of Poles, New Zealanders, and Canadians, as well as Czechs, Australians, Belgians, South Africans, French, Irish—and nine Americans. Since World War Two, the R.A.F. has seen active service in Korea, the Falkland Islands, the Gulf War, Iraq, Afghanistan, and, most recently, Syria.
In the past one hundred years, then, the Royal Air Force has made a vital contribution to the military defence of the West. And if we believe in the West, which even today remains more Christianised than it often knows, then, in this centenary, we should give thanks to God for the R.A.F.’s defence of it. That’s my third point.

My fourth and final point is this. The heroic contribution of the R.A.F. to the salvation of this country, and the world, in the 1940s is very well known. Less well known is its contribution, during the same period, of a spiritual item to the classics of war literature. What I have in mind here is Richard Hillary’s *The Last Enemy*, which first appeared in 1942 and has just been republished by Penguin Books as one of six volumes to mark the centenary. An Australian, Hillary was a student at Trinity College here in Oxford when war broke out in 1939. As a member of the R.A.F. Volunteer Reserve, he was immediately called up. Becoming another member of the Few, he flew Spitfires in the Battle of Britain, before being shot down and terribly burned. He underwent several operations by the famous plastic surgeon, Archibald McIndoe. After an agonisingly slow recovery, he pleaded to be allowed to return to flying and eventually got his way. A few months later his plane crashed during a night training operation, and he was killed at the age of 23.

Yet his name has survived his death seventy-five years ago. That’s because, while convalescing, he had decided to write an account of his war-time experience. The result was, naturally, a story of comradeship and combat, but it was more than just that. It also contained moral and, more deeply, a spiritual reflection upon the reasons for fighting, in the form of a dialogue between Hillary, who presents himself as a rather cynical, egoistic atheist, and his friend, Peter Pease, a socially conservative Englishman, inspired by Christian ideals. At one point, Hillary says this:

I am fighting this war because I believe that, in war, one can swiftly develop all one’s faculties to a degree it would normally take half a lifetime to achieve. That’s why I’m in the Air Force. For in a Spitfire we’re back to war as it ought to be…. Back to individual combat, to self-reliance, total responsibility for one’s own fate. One either kills or is killed; and it’s damned exciting.

A little later, he adds:

The mass of mankind leaves me cold. My only concern outside myself is my immediate circle of friends, to whom I behave well, basically, I suppose, because I hope they’ll behave well towards me.

To this Peter Pease replies:
I would say that I was fighting to rid the world of fear—of the fear of fear… If the Germans win this war, nobody except little Hitlers will dare do anything… All courage will die out of the world—the courage to love, to create, to take risks, whether physical or intellectual or moral. Men will hesitate to carry out the promptings of the heart or the brain because, having acted, they will live in fear that their action may be discovered and themselves cruelly punished. Thus all love, all spontaneity, will die out of the world… The oxygen breathed by the soul … will vanish, and mankind will wither.

Thus to Hillary’s atheistic, individualistic, and amoral explanation of his motivation, Peter Pease opposes a moral, socially responsible, Christian vision. In the end, it seems that Hillary undergoes a tacit conversion. The book closes literally at its beginning, with Hillary in hospital, wondering what on earth to do with himself. The very last paragraph runs as follows:

But I! What could I do now? After a while it came to me. I could write. Later there would be other things, but now I could write. If I could tell a little of the lives of these men, I would have justified, at least in some measure, my right to fellowship with the dead, and to the friendship of those with courage and steadfastness who were still living and who would go on fighting until the ideals for which their comrades had died were stamped for ever on the future of civilization.

It seems, then, that before he died, Hillary had been won over to his friend’s more extrovert, more expansive, more moral Christian vision. This appearance is confirmed by his choice of the book’s title. For beneath it, on the title page, runs a quotation from St Paul’s first epistle to the Corinthians, xv, 26: “The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death”.

So: may God be thanked for the witness of Peter Pease, the inspiration of Richard Hillary, their comrades past and present, and the Royal Air Force!