

High Stakes!

Daniel 12¹⁻³; Psalm 16; Hebrews 10^{11-14,19-25}; Mark 13¹⁻⁸

*For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.
[Mark 13⁸]*

On Remembrance Sunday I always get a bit of a reality check when I read the name of JHA Linton, the son of Bishop Linton, one of my predecessors as Rector of Handsworth. He must have been looking forward to a full life after he graduated with his BA from St Catharine's College, Cambridge. In the London Gazette of Friday 18th April 1941 it makes public: *Acting Pilot Officer on probation James Hugh Arnold Linton (77476) is confirmed in his appointment 6th Feb. 1941 and graded as Pilot Officer on probation.* By the 25th April 1941, a member of 228 Squadron, is missing presumed killed after a crash into the sea near Greece. He was an Observer on Sunderland Mk I T9048 of 228 Squadron when it crashed into the sea. The aircraft was on an operation to evacuate RAF personnel from Greece to Suda Bay in Crete following the German invasion there. The crew had carried out a number of these in the preceding days, including one the day before which set the record for the number of men to fly on board a Sunderland at one time. As the Sunderland flew very long missions it had a large crew and effectively doubled up in each crew position so one half could rest. They returned to their task on the night of 25th of April 1941 but as they arrived over the area there was no flare path (as the Sunderland was a seaplane these were floating flares). The sea was glassy and the pilot misjudged his height over the water at night and the aircraft crashed and broke up on impact, killing six of the crew with four surviving. Those who died were: Pilot Officer James Hugh Arnold Linton (Observer); Pilot Officer John Clement Julius Lylian (2nd Pilot); Sergeant Edmund Cooper (Air Gunner); Sergeant Roy Herbert Alexander Warren (Air Gunner); Sergeant Taliesin James (Air Gunner); Leading Aircraftman Brian William Thomas Somers (Flight Mechanic). The survivors, who clung on to a piece of the wing which was floating, were: Flight Lieutenant Henry William Lamond (Pilot); Pilot Officer Robert Rowland Briscoe (Observer); Pilot

Officer Leslie James Edward Goldfinch (Observer); Flight Sergeant Daniel Verdun Davies (Observer). They were rescued by the Germans and were taken prisoner. His name is on the memorial at Alamein, but his body was never recovered. It reminds me that we are not always as insulated as we think from the things that happen elsewhere in the world.

Whilst the UK is not officially at war at the moment (not even with France) I think we may be surprised at where UK forces find themselves in a supporting role. 132,855 deaths were as a direct result of war in 2020. In that year there were 2 UK deaths in what is known as 'medal earning theatres' rather than accidental deaths.

For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.

Whatever battles there may be – physical, emotional or spiritual – the readings for today remind us of the cosmic battle that we are engaged in and where the stakes are eternal life or eternal death:

- ✘ We know what the result will be. Hebrews tells us that Jesus, **had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins** and that the result of that is that, ultimately, **his enemies [will] be made a footstool for his feet**. That means we rise to the challenge to **approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith**, and also to the encouragement, **let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful**. It is a faith that is straightforward and uncomplicated, like the Psalmists, **my share has fallen in a fair land, indeed I have a goodly heritage**, and that eternal confidence that, **you will not abandon my soul to death, nor suffer your faithful one to see the Pit**.
- ✘ Daniel does not disappoint us as the apocalyptic writer in the Hebrew Scriptures. His image of the Archangel **Michael** towering over the wreck of human history and as the agent of resurrection and judgement. It is that stark demarcation that is so frightening: **many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake**,

some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. God respects the choices we make in life.

- ✘ Jesus surprises the disciples when he challenges their notion of the permanence of the physical temple: they may have been **large stones**, but by 70CE the Emperor Nero had sent Vespasian to Jerusalem and 3,600 Jews had been massacred, the Temple defiled by an image of Nero being set up and then the Temple itself was destroyed (only from that day to this the ‘Wailing Wall’ is the only part that remains), fulfilling the prophecy, **not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.**

That will be part of the **wars and rumours of wars** and the **earthquakes and famines**: the **birth pangs** of what is to come. We have learnt, as Bishop Linton before us, that we are not insulated – those global pandemics, and floods, and danger can reach us too.

Our human life is fragile; our human society is fragile; our planet is fragile. Whatever we can do to escape war, support each other or challenge global warming, we must know that all we have is that confidence in our first hymn, *O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come* and as we will sing, *Past put behind us, for the future takes us. Lord of the years, to life for Christ alone.*