**Sermon by the Rev Dr (Wg Cdr) David Richardson, Senior Chaplain, at the RAF 100 Service in St Anne’s Cathedral, Sunday April 29th 2018.**

It is an immense joy and privilege for the Royal Air Force family to gather in St Anne's today for this service of commemoration and thanksgiving. Our focus today has been not simply celebrating the centenary of the RAF, but exploring the particular relationship with this island over the past century. And it’s a deep relationship, with many dimensions. We could focus on the dimension of place – the physical presence of military aviation in the landscape. The mossy concrete piers on Lough Erne remind us of the Catalina flying boats heading across the Donegal air corridor to provide vital air cover for the Atlantic convoys. The very active runways at Dublin airport that were once known as RAF Collinstown. The little concrete huts on the north coast which were once RAF Murlough Bay, a radar station monitoring the cold war skies. And the marble inscription in the senate chamber at Parliament Buildings, reminding us that it was an RAF operations room during the Second World War. We could focus on the dimension of production. Aircraft building began in Belfast in 1917, turning out Avros and Handley Page among others. Short Brothers started production in 1936, manufacturing Stirling bombers and many other types - and some Belfast built Tucano aircraft are still in RAF service. The textile sector continues to manufacture flying and operational clothing, and we must mention our very own local superfabric. Not Dacron or Goretex but of course Irish linen. Up until the jet age, almost every RAF aircraft was covered at least in part by Irish linen. To give some idea of the demand, by 1943 the RAF was consuming some twenty miles of Irish linen every week. So we have strong connections in terms of place and production. But people are at the heart of what we do. And it’s the human dimension of the RAF story that I want to focus on this afternoon. Because there is a very significant connection between the people of this land and the Royal Air Force – cadets, civil servants, contractors, families, reserve and regular service personnel. Many of those stories are in your service booklet – others are sitting around you in this building. Let’s take a look at some stories on a flight round the island. And we can start right here. Just outside these windows is Academy Street. It’s the original home of Belfast Royal Academy. Many former pupils joined the wartime air force. One was Flight Lieutenant Stanley Gray, former captain of the first XV, who joined the RAF in 1940, telling his family that he was an instructor with Bomber Command. He was actually a pilot on the secret special duties squadron at RAF Tempsford, ferrying special forces operatives into France. On one such flight his Lysander crashed, costing his life. The school continues to send pupils into the RAF and has a very active air cadet unit, 2390 squadron. We can take off from here – after all the first successful jump jet was built in Belfast and head out past Tigers Bay. Home of the broadcaster, journalist and Senator in the erektas, the late Sam McAughtry. But long before we heard him on Radio Ulster he was Flying Officer McAughtry, a navigator with the RAF in the wartime Aegean theatre. We fly on past Aldergrove, the home airfield of 502 Squadron, Ulster's own reservists, who served with such distinction in Coastal Command, and have recently reformed to serve in new capacities. Up we go to Ramelton on Lough Swilly, County Donegal. Home of the late Bill McCrea, Irish golf international who also played a key role in organising the 1981 Ryder Cup. Those who played with him said how cool he was under pressure. He may have learned that as a Lancaster pilot in Bomber Command, winning the DFC in 1943 over the Ruhr. Turning south again we fly over County Armagh, home of Oscar Heron. A fighter ace of the great war with 10 victories, following his RAF service he was one of the founder pilots in the Military Air Service, forerunner to the Irish Air Corps. Before his premature death in a flying accident, Heron took part in the Air Corps’ first search and rescue mission, as well as writing a paper considering the future strategic development of Irish aviation. Flying west to Galway, we come to Roundstone, the home of Tom Hazell, who scored 43 victories between 1917 and 1918. He was one of the top five British aces in the Great War – in fact three out of the five were Irish born. Heading east again we fly over Trinity College, Dublin. It was the University of County Clare man Sir Harold Maguire, staff officer in the far east and later as an Air Marshal, Director of Defence Intelligence. Moving south west we come to County Laois, the home of Sir Dermot Boyle. Lord Trenchard's vision when he established the RAF College at Cranwell was that it would eventually produce the Chief of the Air Staff. Dermot Boyle was the first person to complete that journey – and Trenchard lived just long enough to see it.. And on the last leg, we head about as far southwest as we can go to Castletownbere, in Cork, for possibly the most remarkable story of all. Aidan McCarthy was a doctor who joined the RAF in 1939, and was posted to France. Evacuated through Dunkirk, he was a medical officer at RAF Honington in Suffolk when a Wellington bomber crashed. For his work in entering the blazing wreck to rescue survivors, he was awarded the George Medal. In 1941 he was posted to the Far East and was captured by the Japanese in Sumatra. En route to the Japanese mainland, his prison ship was sunk by Allied aircraft, and he ministered as best as he could to prisoners in the water before being picked up by a Japanese fishing boat. McCarthy's experience in prison camps was harrowing. In addition to the privations that all the captives endured, he was singled out for especial beatings by the guards who thought he must be related to General Douglas MacArthur. On the 9th August 1945, he was in a work party in Nagasaki when the atomic bomb dropped and ministered to the survivors. When liberation came, it was McCarthy who stepped in to prevent the Japanese camp commandant from being lynched. The grateful officer's sword is back in Castletownbere. Fittingly, the RAF named a new medical centre at Honington in his honour last year. Later in life, Aidan McCarthy reflected that what helped him endure was his deep Christian faith. What the RAF today would describe as spiritual resilience – the ability to frame our lives in a bigger context of meaning.

That is essentially what both our scripture readings today are inviting us to do. Both Paul and Isaiah are showing us that the lives we lead are to be seen in a much bigger context. Paul’s famous words from Ephesians remind us that the struggles in which we are engaged are ultimately spiritual rather than merely material. But let’s look a little more closely at those words from Isaiah chapter 40. They are words that we are very familiar with in the Royal Air Force, referring as they do to eagles – an emblem which every RAF member wears somewhere on their uniform. When it comes to understanding a Bible text, its always worth looking at the context. The prophet Isaiah lived in Jerusalem about 700 BC, and much of his writing refers to how Israel and Judah would be caught up in the imperial expansion of the Assyrians and the Babylonians. Isaiah is writing chapter 40 particularly for Israelite exiles living in the land of Babylon. That all seems very long ago and very far away, doesn’t it? But give that region its modern names and it comes a bit more into focus. Iraq. And if there’s one part of the world the Royal Air Force knows well it is Iraq. In reading Sir Dermot Boyle’s biography, I was struck by the fact that we had both served in the same parts of Iraq, but exactly ninety years apart. I know that many of you here have spent time there too. So we can imagine the landscape that these people were living in.

And Isaiah wants to teach them some spiritual resilience. Verse 27 shows why. The exiles were wondering why God had abandoned them – why it seemed that God had forgotten about them and left them in this desert. So Isaiah reminds them who God is. Do you not know, have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. He doesn’t faint or grow weary, and his knowledge is far above ours, and he helps those who are in difficulty. Now here Isaiah is teaching a principle that we recognise very well in the world of aviation. And you can see reminders of this in old RAF aerodromes up and down the country. There are buildings which housed Link trainers – training devices which pilots how to fly without visual clues. Because when you’re in darkness or cloud, or low visibility, you can’t simply trust your senses. You need reliable information. And the link trainer taught you to do just that. To watch your gauges and displays – and trust what they tell you. And this is basically what Isaiah is telling these exiles – trust your instruments –trust what you know about God.

And that’s what lies behind these great verses ‘even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted. But they who wait for the Lord will renew their strength. They will shall mount up with wings like eagles they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint. The words that Isaiah is using here really refer to soldiers. The Israelites could see the might of the Babylonian army all around them. But Isaiah says – even military power has its limits. Human strength, however impressive it may be, wears out. We need something bigger than ourselves. The Royal Air Force is aware of this, because we describe ourselves as a force for good – we measure ourselves against an external standard. And Isaiah invites us to reflect on this even further. Our human strength may be limited, but those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles. That word wait means to trust. To look beyond our immediate circumstances and trust in the promises of God. And to those Israelites, that phrase about eagles wings was already familiar. Because God use that very phrase to describe how he took them from exile in Egypt centuries before – I lifted you on Eagles wings. So to give a scan over the instrument panel, Isaiah is saying – don’t look at the Babylonian empire around you – look to the eternal God who has a history of rescuing you. And as the book of Isaiah unfolds, he points to the coming of Christ, who would one day deal with our biggest problems of sin and death through the cross and resurrection.

So as we celebrate a century of the Royal Air Force, and commemorate those who have gone before, let us be inspired by these words of Isaiah as we look towards the demands of the next hundred years. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men fall exhausted, but those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength – they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.