

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer.

About 20 years ago the son of a friend of mine had to do a school project on “My Hero.” His father, my friend, also a clergyman, was proud but somewhat surprised by his son’s choice. So, he asked him “Alex, why did you choose Jesus for My Hero?” Well, Daddy, said Alex, I couldn’t spell Arnold Schwarzenegger.

The word hero is used quite casually today in some circles. Pop stars might be labelled heroes if they do something for charity, sportspeople get called heroes if they win against a bigger team, against the odds. Just listen out for how many times the word hero is used in the Euro 2024 Football Championship. Good and notable though music and sport can be, and as good as sportspeople and musicians can be, and I am not sure I would call them heroic. In fact, I am sure I would not.

However, as we meet today, to commemorate the battle at Kohima, and to celebrate the amazing work and legacy of the Kohima Educational Trust, it is not hard to find examples of true heroes.

On the memorial which stands on the battlefield of Kohima are the words “When you go home, tell them of us and say ‘For your tomorrow, we gave our today.’” Some true heroes came home, and some true heroes were left behind. The fighting which surged around Kohima and Imphal for those 4 months in 1944 became a turning-point in the Second World War. It has now become a legend of the dogged determination, courage and heroism of an army that had suffered months of adversity, in a retreat over some of the worst terrain in the world, in a climate that sapped the strength of even the strongest.

But there was another factor for the British soldier. India and Burma were the other side of the world, and these battles were fought at a time when the attention of those at home was focused on events in Europe. General Slim knew this all too well and told his officers “The dominant feeling of the battlefield is loneliness, gentlemen, and morale – only morale – individual morale as a foundation under training and discipline will bring victory.” Slim understood the dominance of the human spirit in adversity, and what it is that enables us to rise above terrible hardship.

In his classic account of the war in Burma *Defeat Into Victory* Slim describes how the harsh conditions brought about in the soldiers of the 14th Army an *esprit de corps*, and a sense of belonging to and serving each other.

One of the reasons why remembering the Kohima-Imphal battles can be so important for those serving in the armed forces today is because, although the material conditions were appalling, heroism and serving others came through. The Regimental history of the 4th Battalion of the Royal West Kents (my home regiment from Maidstone) reads “On 4th April 1944, 161 Brigade was ordered to return to Kohima, the West Kents, with a strength of under 500, were in the lead. The vehicles stopped at the DC’s bungalow, and debussed under fire. The companies sprinted to take cover over the key positions, and minutes later the Japanese shellfire crashed down. The rest of the Brigade were now unable to reach Kohima, the battalion was now the only organised British force in the garrison.”

It is to such narrow margins that we owe our freedom today, and it is right we remember the heroism of those at Kohima and the legacy of subsequent peace it has left us. But not just Kohima, for 2024 is year in which some of the great responses to hardship and acts of heroism will be recalled.

This year is a year when we have the chance to see and hear the stories of many, real heroes. Last month I was in Normandy at Ver-sur-Mer for the 80th anniversary of the D Day landings. I had the privilege to meet some real heroes of the armed forces and of the French Resistance. Among those I met was Colette Marin-

Catherine, who had joined the Resistance aged 15. Colette ran a sort of first aid post from the back of the family house and then, in the months after D Day, acted as a nurse in which she saw some horrific wounds. Her brother was arrested, sent to a labour camp and then died in a concentration camp aged 19. In September this year, it will be the 80th anniversary of the battle of Arnhem. There will be heroic deeds re-told and for which we will give thanks.

The motto of the RAF Chaplains' Profession, of which I am proud to be a member, is *Ministrare non ministrari*. Now, if your Latin is as ropey as my Serbo-Croat, let me translate that for you "To serve, not to be served." You may remember that these were the words which the King said as he first entered Westminster Abbey last year for his coronation. It is not a saying the chaplains, the present King have made-up. We pinched it from Jesus, who said, he "did not come to be served, but to serve." There will be times, many times when we need to do the right thing for others, even though it may not be what we would personally desire or choose. We are not here to serve ourselves, we are here to serve others. Around you today are some people who are wonderful examples of service to others.

There is, of course, no room for us to be smug and think that we are blameless in our own lives, or to think that we can't do better. Coming here, on this 80th anniversary

of Kohima, gives us the chance to pause and reflect. Reflection can be a step to self-improvement and to commit to helping others. We might not be called to be heroic in what we do, or even to act like a character portrayed by Arnold Schwarzenegger, but we are called to be faithful, even in the toughest of circumstances. We would do well to remember true heroes such as those at Kohima. "When you go home, tell them of us and say 'For your tomorrow, we gave our today.'"

Amen.