

# Scripture, Setting, and Audience in the RAF Talks of C. S. Lewis

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## ABSTRACT

It is difficult to connect individual sermons by C. S. Lewis with specific scripture texts. The wartime talks Lewis gave to RAF officers, NCOs, and airmen provide a new lens for examining this puzzle. Through biblical allusions and paraphrases, both colloquial and literary, Lewis was able to translate Holy Writ for live military audiences. Sometimes he spoke on the prescribed scripture text from the *Book of Common Prayer*. On other occasions, he chose a different text. When addressing committed believers, he delved deeper into explaining particular biblical passages. More often, he sent up an intellectual barrage, answering preliminary questions regarding faith, reason, and imagination. Lewis undertook an exhausting travel schedule visiting RAF stations, units, and camps throughout Britain. His creative approach to the use of scripture was one of the ways he sought to encourage military chaplains and to engage RAF aircrews and ground crews with the Christian message.

In the midst of World War II deprivations and dangers, the Royal Air Force (RAF) marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of its founding on Thursday, 1 April 1943. It was an opportunity for the nation to honor the youngest of Britain's armed services, though in a necessarily muted manner. In London, for the first time, the RAF Regiment mounted guard at Buckingham Palace, the RAF Ensign joined other flags posted at the Cenotaph, and the Prime Minister was awarded honorary wings by the Air Council. In response to the latter honor, Winston Churchill said:

At this moment we may say without vanity that the Royal Air Force—taken for all in all—is ‘Second to None.’ At this moment it is the spearpoint of the British offensive against

that proud and cruel enemy who boasted that he would 'erase' the cities of our native land, and hoped to lay all the lands under his toll and thrall.<sup>1</sup>

Various other commemorations were held throughout Britain, many of them religious in nature. On the Sunday preceding the official anniversary, C. S. Lewis was invited to preach to the RAF No. 3 Initial Training Wing (ITW) in Torquay, Devon. He spoke at two anniversary church parades in the coastal town on the morning of 28 March: one for the No. 3 ITW itself and one for the teenage cadets of 200 Squadron of the Air Training Corps.<sup>2</sup> In reporting on these services for the official record, an RAF chaplain noted that the commanding officer had read the 'lesson' (presumably Luke 11:14-28),<sup>3</sup> and that Lewis 'met cadets afterwards'. However, under the heading of which scripture text was used by the preacher, the good Padre<sup>4</sup> simply stated 'No Text'.<sup>5</sup>

This brief comment encapsulates a puzzling thing about the surviving sermons of C. S. Lewis. While they are Orthodox in content, and helpful in terms of spiritual direction, it is difficult to connect individual sermons by Lewis with specific scripture texts. He was not an exegetical preacher. Even for his 1941 sermon 'The Weight of Glory', whose title is drawn from the phrase 'weight of glory' in 2 Corinthians 4:17, Lewis had as his announced text not that passage but Revelations 2:26, 28. 'And he that overcometh, I will give him the morning star'.<sup>6</sup> As Greg Anderson notes, 'He

1 Anonymous, 'Air Notes Royal Air Force', *Royal United Services Institution Journal* 88, is. 550 (1943), p. 156.

2 MS, *RAF No. 3 ITW [S1], Register of Services (Form 356 B)*, Amport House Archive, 28 March 1943.

3 This is the Gospel Lesson for the Third Sunday in Lent, according to the 1662 edition of the *Book of Common Prayer*.

4 RAF chaplains (both male and female), like other British military chaplains, are routinely referred to as 'Padre'.

5 *No. 3 ITW*, 28 March 1943.

6 C. S. Lewis, 'The Weight of Glory', *Theology* 43, no. 257 (November 1941), p. 263.

was biblical in his theology but the biblical texts seldom made it into his sermons'.<sup>7</sup>

The wartime talks Lewis gave to RAF personnel provide a new lens for examining this puzzle. The Oxford don volunteered as a Lay Lecturer for the RAF Chaplains' Branch, working with chaplains in addressing troops, from 9 April 1941 to 16 July 1945. His first talk, a lecture, occurred on the Wednesday of Holy Week 1941 to aircrews in training with the No. 10 Operational Training Unit (OTU) at RAF Abingdon.<sup>8</sup> His last documented RAF address, a question and answer session or 'one man Brains Trust', was held for RAF and Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) ground personnel assigned to the No. 225 Maintenance Unit (MU), Warminster.<sup>9</sup> In between, Lewis is known to have addressed the RAF at about twenty other military installations (see Table 1, overleaf), though his actual number of RAF visits was probably far higher.

Lewis gave these RAF talks in a variety of settings: hangers, Nissen huts, parade grounds, libraries, YMCA buildings, and station chapels. He also delivered different types of presentations: lectures, discussions, live Brains Trusts (based on the BBC's 'Brains Trust' radio show), and sermons. What can these reveal about how Lewis made use of scripture in live addresses to non-academic audiences? In particular, how do these RAF talks illuminate his approach to scripture in his preaching? Indications are that Lewis, like any good preacher, adjusted his approach based on his setting and his audience. As he would express in another context, 'what you see and hear depends a good deal on where you are standing:

- 7 Greg M. Anderson, 'The Sermons of C. S. Lewis: The Oxford Don as Preacher' in *C. S. Lewis: Life Works and Legacy*, ed. by Bruce L. Edwards (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2007), vol. 3, p. 79.
- 8 MS, *Royal Air Force Operations Record Book, Form 540, RAF No. 10 Operational Training Unit (OTU) Abingdon*, National Archives, Kew, Air 29/638, April 1941, p. 1.
- 9 MS, *Royal Air Force Operations Record Book, Form 540, RAF No. 225 Maintenance Unit (MU), Warminster*, National Archives, Kew, Air 29/638, July 1945, p. 19.

**Table 1**  
**Known R.A.F. Stations, Units and Camps**  
**Visited by C.S. Lewis**

1. RAF No. 10 OTU, RAF Abingdon, Berkshire, England, 9 April 1941.<sup>i</sup>
2. [?], Perthshire, Scotland, Undated 1941.<sup>ii</sup>
3. RAF Shawbury, Shrewsbury, Shropshire, England, Undated 1941.<sup>iii</sup>
4. [?], Cumberland (Perhaps RAF stations Crosby-on-Eden, Kirkbride or Millom), England, Undated 1941.<sup>iv</sup>
5. RAF Halton, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, England, Undated 1941-45.<sup>v</sup>
6. RAF Locking, Somerset, England, Undated 1941-45.<sup>vi</sup>
7. RAF Hereford, Herefordshire, England, 1 September 1941.<sup>vii</sup>
8. RAF Henlow, Bedfordshire, England, 21 September 1941.<sup>viii</sup>
9. RAF No. 6 ITW, Aberystwyth, Ceredigion, Wales, 3-5 October 1941.<sup>ix</sup>
10. RAF Hereford, Herefordshire, England, **2nd visit**, early 1942.<sup>x</sup>
11. RAF Mount Batten, Plymouth, Devon, England, March/April 1942.<sup>xi</sup>
12. RAF Cranwell, Lincolnshire, England, 8-11 April 1942.<sup>xii</sup>
13. [?], RAF 'camp in our grim eastern counties' (Lincolnshire, Norfolk, and Suffolk were home to many squadrons under Bomber Command), mid-April 1942.<sup>xiii</sup>
14. RAF Yatesbury, Wiltshire, England, 30 August 1942.<sup>xiv</sup>
15. RAF Trerew Chain Home Station, Cornwall, England, 13 September 1942.<sup>xv</sup>
16. RAF No. 7 ITW, Newquay, Cornwall, England, 13-18 September 1942<sup>xvi</sup> (Presumably also troops from RAF No. 8 ITW, RAF Trebelzue, and RAF Perranporth).
17. RAF Cottesmore, Rutland, England, 10 January 1943.<sup>xvii</sup>
18. RAF No. 3 ITW, Torquay, Devon, England, 28 March 1943.<sup>xviii</sup>
19. RAF Feltwell, Norfolk, England, 18 April 1943.<sup>xix</sup>
20. RAF Methwold, Norfolk, England, 18 April 1943.<sup>xx</sup>
21. RAF Chicksands, Bedfordshire, England, August 1943.<sup>xxi</sup>
22. RAF Chaplains' School, Cambridge, England, 27 April, 11 May, [8 and 22 June, 27 July, 10 August, and 30 November] 1944.<sup>xxii</sup>
23. [?], Rochester, Kent, England, Jan 1945.<sup>xxiii</sup>
24. RAF No. 225 Maintenance Unit, Warminster, Wiltshire, England, 13-16 July 1945.<sup>xxiv</sup>

## Table 1 Notes

- i. No. 10 OTU, p. 1.
- ii. C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. by Walter Hooper, 3 vols. (San Francisco, 2004-7), 2:504.
- iii. Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 2:504.
- iv. Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 2:504.
- v. Letter of Charles Gilmore to Walter Hooper, dated 4 November 1972, quoted in Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: The Authorized and Revised Biography* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), p. 251.
- vi. Green and Hooper, *Revised Biography*, p. 251.
- vii. MS, RAF Hereford [Presbyterian, Methodist and United Board 1], *Register of Services (Form 356 B)*, Amport House Archive, 1 September 1941.
- viii. MS, RAF Henlow [S4], *Register of Services (Form 356 B)*, Amport House Archive, 22 September 1941.
- ix. Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 2:492-3.
- x. Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 2:516.
- xi. Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 2:516.
- xii. MS, RAF Cranwell [S9], *Register of Services (Form 356 B)*, Amport House Archive, 8-11 April 1942.
- xiii. Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 2:517.
- xiv. Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 2:523-5.
- xv. MS, *The Forgotten Front: Y.M.C.A. Christian Campaign for H. M. Forces in Newquay. September 13th-20th*. Newquay Old Cornwall Society, 1942.
- xvi. Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 2:531.
- xvii. MS, RAF Cottesmore [S1], *Register of Services (Form 356 B)*, Amport House Archive, 10 January 1943.
- xviii. No. 3 ITW, 28 March 1943.
- xix. MS, RAF Feltwell [S1], *Register of Services (Form 356 B)*, Amport House Archive, 18 April 1943.
- xx. Stuart Barton Babbage, 'To the Royal Air Force', in C. S. Lewis: *Speaker and Teacher*, ed. by Carolyn Keefe (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), p. 70.
- xxi. Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 2:588.
- xxii. MS, *Royal Air Force Operations Record Book, Form 540, R.A.F. Chaplains' School, Cambridge*, National Archives, Kew, AIR 29/752 and AIR 29/1136, April and May 1944. For the dates of other possible visits by Lewis to the RAF Chaplains' School, see Bruce R. Johnson, "Answers that Belonged to Life": C.S. Lewis and the Origins of the Royal Air Force Chaplains' School, Cambridge', *Sehnsucht: The C. S. Lewis Journal* 5/6 (2011/12), pp. 81-101.
- xxiii. Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 2:638.
- xxiv. No. 225 MU, p. 19.

it also depends on what sort of person you are'.<sup>10</sup> In order to demonstrate how this affected the labors of Lewis among the Royal Air Force, there are five categories of evidence to be examined: (1) the complete text of 'Making and Begetting', originally delivered at RAF Feltwell, (2) memories from chaplains and other clergy who were present during other RAF talks, (3) notes by Lewis of his talk 'All or Nothing', (4) titles of four RAF addresses by Lewis without surviving texts or notes, and (5) his BBC series '*Christian Behaviour*', which was prepared for 'such people in the RAF as might come to hear' him.<sup>11</sup> Each of these categories will be explored in turn with particular attention to Lewis's use of scripture on each occasion. Instead of an exploration of Lewis's conception of the inspiration or authority or Holy Writ, this is an exploration of his homiletical craft while addressing wartime, military audiences.

The address 'Making and Begetting' was originally delivered as a sermon preached at the 9:30 a.m. parade service at RAF Feltwell on Palm Sunday, 18 April 1943. Lewis repeated the sermon an hour later at the satellite airfield, RAF Methwold. Both aerodromes were under the control of Bomber Command during this period. At RAF Methwold, squadrons were flying twin-engine bombers: the Lockheed Ventura, the Vickers Wellington, and the wood-framed de Havilland Mosquito. At Feltwell, No. 57 Squadron had recently converted to a four-engined heavy bomber: the iconic Avro Lancaster. In addition, the No. 192 Squadron was flying specially modified versions of the four-engined Handley Page Halifax designed for German radar detection and identification. The Rev. (Squadron Leader) Stuart Barton Babbage, the young chaplain hosting C. S. Lewis for the weekend, described the challenges faced by all of these wartime aircrews:

10 C. S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew* (New York: Scholastic, 1988), p. 125.

11 Letter of Eric Fenn to C. S. Lewis, dated June 1942, quoted in Justin Phillips, *C. S. Lewis in a Time of War: The World War II Broadcasts That Riveted a Nation and Became the Classic Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), p. 159.

Our casualties had been heavy: we were, at the time, engaged in massive night bombing attacks against some of the most heavily fortified targets in Germany and occupied Europe. A tour of duty consisted of thirty or more operations against enemy targets: after that, a man was taken off for a period of rest before being rescheduled for another tour. The grim fact was that, on average, a man only completed thirteen raids before being killed or posted missing. These men (in the glory of their budding manhood) knew, statistically speaking, that there was little chance of their completing even one tour.<sup>12</sup>

Lewis was one of only nine communicants present as Padre Babbage led the 8:00 a.m. Sunday celebration of Holy Communion at Feltwell. However, the open air parade services which followed were mandatory formations which would have involved hundreds of airmen, NCOs, and officers<sup>13</sup> at each location. Church parades remained mandatory (and controversial) in the RAF throughout the war. Babbage himself viewed this requirement as a necessary evil under the circumstances, while Lewis viewed it as a self-defeating proposition ‘calculated, he firmly believed, to harden men in impenitence’.<sup>14</sup>

Some idea of the actual amount of impenitence or piety among wartime RAF personnel, as compared to the population in general, can be gleaned from a 1941 Mass Observation Report.<sup>15</sup> The results are reproduced in Table 2 (overleaf).

Allowing for differences in how these opinions were collected (written forms among the national population group, and oral interviews among the RAF), it is still striking to see how much lower was the number of RAF men who had no religion or were indifferent to religion (11%) as compared to the male population

12 Babbage, ‘Royal Air Force’, p. 65-6.

13 In the RAF, only ranks below non-commissioned officer level are called ‘airmen’ or ‘other ranks’. In the current U.S. Air Force, all uniformed personal are called airmen.

14 Babbage, ‘Royal Air Force’, p. 68.

15 MS, FR 622 ‘R.A.F. Trends’, Mass-Observation Archive, University of Sussex, 1941.

as a whole (35%). In addition, prayers for family and friends (36%) and for peace (25%) were mentioned twice as frequently among the RAF sampling. In other words, though Lewis had a captive audience, these officers and other ranks were perhaps more open to a religious point of view than was the average man in Britain.

Babbage, like the vast majority of RAF chaplains, was a priest in the Church of England. Thus the Padre would have drawn on the resources of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* in putting together the parade services for that morning. The prescribed Gospel reading for Palm Sunday is the story of Christ's Passion from Matthew 27. The lesson closes at verse 54, with the words of the centurion at the cross: "Truly this was the Son of God". The morning sermon by Lewis focused on the meaning of this very statement. His title, 'Making and Begetting', is a reference to the significance of Christ being the Begotten Son of God, a being of the same kind as God, rather than a made being in essence dissimilar to God. Similarly, a sculptor may beget a son, but only makes a piece of art.

In the printed version of this sermon, now the opening chapter in Book IV of *Mere Christianity*, Lewis began with a sentence designed to grab the attention of his audience. 'Everyone has warned me not to tell you what I am going to tell you...'.<sup>16</sup> What might that be? Next he introduced his topic—theology—and gave an RAF story as his opening illustration.

I remember once when I had been giving a talk to the R.A.F., an old, hard-bitten officer got up and said, 'I've no use for all that stuff. But, mind you, I'm a religious man too. I know there's a God. I've felt Him: out alone in the desert at night: the tremendous mystery. And that's just why I don't believe all your neat little dogmas and formulas about Him. To anyone who's met the real thing they all seem so petty and pedantic and unreal!'<sup>17</sup>

Lewis goes on to compare the differences between dry theology

16 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), p. 135.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 135.



**Table 2**  
**Opinion Trend Among RAF Men as Compared with  
National Panel**

*What effect, if any, has the war had on your whole attitude toward religion, your religious beliefs and observances, church going, etc?*

| EFFECTS ON FAITH           | NATIONAL PANEL MEN | RAF |
|----------------------------|--------------------|-----|
| Strengthened Considerably  | 9%                 | 9%  |
| Strengthened Slightly      | 9                  | 16  |
| No Effect                  | 37                 | 47  |
| Weakened slightly          | 2                  | 5   |
| Weakened Considerably      | 2                  | 5   |
| Lost                       | 1                  | –   |
| No Religion or Indifferent | 35                 | 11  |
| No reply or irrelevant     | –                  | 7   |

*If you pray, what do you pray about nowadays?*

| SUBJECT OF PRAYERS | PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE MENTIONING THIS PRAYER |     |
|--------------------|---|-----|
|                    | NATIONAL PANEL MEN                          | RAF |
| Friends, Family    | 18%   | 36% |
| Peace              | 11  | 25  |
| Other People       | 4   | 2   |
| Self               | 20  | 2   |
| Everyone           | 11  | 5   |
| Thanksgiving, etc. | 4   | –   |
| Victory            | 4   | 2   |
| People in Danger   | 9   | 5   |
| Don't Pray         | 56  | 25  |

and moving personal experience to the differences between a map of a coast line and a walk along the beach. The walk may be more enjoyable, but the map is more useful when crossing oceans. 'Nor will you be very safe if you go to sea without a map'.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the lives of these aircrews were dependant on their maps, along with radio contact with RAF home stations, in their every crossing of the North Sea. In explaining this, Lewis made specific references to two of Britain's allied countries: 'if you want to get to America' and 'you will not get to Newfoundland'. This may have been especially appreciated by the allied aircrews based at Methwold: No. 464 Squadron (Australia) and No. 487 Squadron (New Zealand). The map—theology—may be somewhat difficult to understand. For example, it makes difficult pronouncements like 'Christ is the Son of God (whatever that means)'.<sup>19</sup> Yet the map can keep you on the right course, like an RAF map of the North Sea.

Lewis would use two additional contrasts in his morning sermons. One contrast was the difference between being "sons of God" in the broad sense of being human and made in God's image, and "becoming" Sons of God<sup>20</sup> in the specific Christian sense of spiritual adoption and regeneration. Here, the word 'becoming' is an imprecise quotation of the somewhat cumbersome rendering of John 1:12 in the King James Version: 'But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name'.

The last contrast presented in 'Making and Begetting' is between biological life (which Lewis calls *Bios*) and the spiritual life from God (which he calls *Zoe*). The sermon ends with a compelling, closing illustration:

A man who changed from having *Bios* to having *Zoe* would have gone through as big a change as a statue which changed from being a carved stone to being a real man.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 136.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 137.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 138.

And that is precisely what Christianity is about. This world is a great sculptor's shop. We are the statues and there is a rumour going round the shop that some of us are some day going to come to life.<sup>21</sup>

So Lewis was able to play off the last line of the Gospel reading, 'Truly this was the Son of God', from Matthew 27:54. He employed a story about an old RAF officer, and another illustration from the RAF world of his audience on the importance of maps, to stress the importance of having a reliable guide for the spiritual world. He admits to the difficulty in understanding statements like 'Christ is the Son of God' and 'those who give him their confidence can also become Sons of God',<sup>22</sup> but says that difficulties in explaining another world are to be expected. He paraphrases John 1:12 on the 'power to become the sons of God' and ends with a vivid image of what it is like to become spiritually alive to God. A specific scripture text, Matthew 27:54, appears to be the basis for a thematic sermon on the meaning of both Christ as the begotten Son of God and his followers becoming 'Sons of God' by placing confidence in Christ. This would also be the pattern of his Whitsunday sermon of 1944, 'Transposition', where the prescribed scripture reading of Acts 2:1-11, the miracle of Pentecost, is the point of departure for a talk about the reality of the world beyond the natural world.

Four years after Feltwell, Lewis observed that 'the Authorized Version has ceased to be a good (that is clear) translation. It is no longer modern English'.<sup>23</sup> However, more modern English translations had not yet come into wide use. This reality, and the desire of Lewis for rhetorical clarity, may be one reason why his sermons seldom include direct quotations from the Bible.

The second category of evidence for the RAF talks of C. S.

21 *Ibid*, p. 140.

22 *Ibid*, p. 137.

23 C. S. Lewis, 'Modern Translations of the Bible', in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. by Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1970), p. 230.

Lewis involves surviving memories of chaplains and other clergy present on such occasions. Some of these remembrances are of question and answer sessions. In these cases, what has survived is mainly some of the questions put to Lewis rather than his answers. The most complete example comes from a 16 September 1942 live Brains Trust for the Forces in Newquay, Cornwall. Lewis participated as a panelist.<sup>24</sup> On that occasion, an RAF pilot asked, 'Would one of you please give us a simple explanation of the Holy Trinity?'. Lewis immediately said to his fellow panelist, 'Go on, Haddon, this is your question'. The panelist replied, 'Lewis, I've just answered the last. You have a go'. With that, Lewis began, 'The question that you have asked us is like asking a slug to explain Einstein'.<sup>25</sup> While crisp, humorous, and to the point, that is the only part of his answer to have survived.

More fruitful fields can be found in a description of his Palm Sunday evening sermons from 1943, and in a remembrance of his April 1944 inaugural lecture at the RAF Chaplains' School. For the RAF personnel at Feltwell and Methwold, attendance at the Palm Sunday evening services (held at 6:30, and repeated at 7:30)<sup>26</sup> was optional. They also differed from the morning church parades in that the majority of the congregation would be officers as well as committed believers. Padre Babbage repeatedly took pains to impress upon Lewis how costly it was for the men who showed up for a voluntary religious service. Military culture encourages uniformity. Derision comes quickly and mercilessly for anyone who stands apart from the group. To this, Lewis gently replied, 'It might be helpful if I told them something of what it cost *me* to be a Christian'.<sup>27</sup>

The chapel at RAF Feltwell was packed that evening (Figure 1).

24 *The Forgotten Front*, 1942; cf. Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II: 531.

25 Bishop A. W. Goodwin-Hudson, 'How I Met C.S. Lewis and Why' Sound recording, Wade Center, CSL-Y / SR-166, 1975.

26 It is unclear from the record whether both evening services were held at the RAF Feltwell chapel, or if the later service was conducted at RAF Methwold.

27 Babbage, 'Royal Air Force', p. 74.

Babbage described the building as:

the small but austere beautiful timbered chapel that had been presented to the Royal Air Force by an engineering firm specializing in the manufacture of airplane turrets [Boulton Paul Aircraft]. The chapel had been formally opened by King George VI...The platform, above the entrance, which had to be reached by a perpendicular ladder, was also filled. The lectern ...had pieces of shrapnel embedded in the wood, historic mementoes of a low-level machine gun attack by some German pilots during the Battle of Britain.<sup>28</sup>

Babbage conducted the service from that lectern, but Lewis stood in the aisle to preach. After invoking the name of the Triune God, Lewis announced, as his text, the words of Jesus from Matthew 16:24: 'If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me'.<sup>29</sup> Here, he was repeating the pattern seen in his earliest sermons. Before preaching at St. Mary's, Oxford, Lewis would always announce, as his text, a short passage not found in that day's appointed readings from Book of Common Prayer (See Table 3, overleaf). That being said, Palm Sunday was certainly an appropriate occasion to meditate on the meaning of the cross of Christ and what it means for a Christian to take up his or her own cross. For the purposes of this article, the name 'Follow Me' has been assigned to this twice-delivered sermon.

As Babbage remembered it, the evening sermon by Lewis had three sections. First, he recounted all that Christ had suffered during his earthly ministry: his 'misunderstanding and loneliness and finally betrayal and death'.<sup>30</sup> Lewis described in particular detail the scenes from that morning's Gospel lesson about Jesus' trial and crucifixion. His words may have been similar to those Lewis put down on paper some years later: 'The buzzing cloud of flies above the cross, the flayed back pressed against the uneven stake, the nails

28 *Ibid.*, pp. 67, 74.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 75.

30 Babbage, 'Royal Air Force', p. 75.

driven through the mesial nerves, the repeated torture of back and arms as it is time after time, for breath's sake, hitched up'.<sup>31</sup>

Next, Lewis spoke of his own experience as a public Christian at Oxford and of the hostility it evoked in some quarters. There was verbal abuse and ostracism from professional colleagues. He also faced charges of selfishness and fanaticism from members of his household. Lewis knew what it was like to 'have one's motives questioned and one's actions misinterpreted'.<sup>32</sup> This was the 'something of what it cost *me* to be a Christian' which he had suggested privately. It was not characteristic of Lewis to speak so freely with strangers about these aspects of his life. Yet, in front of aircrews facing death daily, Lewis appears to have been more open. Perhaps Lewis had in mind the same advice from Thomas à Kempis which he would pass on to an American lady some years later, 'Bear your cross, for if you try to get rid of it you will probably find another and worse one'.<sup>33</sup> These aircrews had a far worse cross than Lewis at the moment in terms of wartime danger. The cross they shared was derision. Lewis gave voice to that shared burden.

Finally, he spoke again of Jesus on the cross and the cruel taunts of the soldiers around him: "That's him!" "Hypocrite!" "Serves him right!" "That's what he deserves!" "Dirty traitor!"<sup>34</sup> Padre Babbage called it 'powerful preaching'. It was also the closest we find in Lewis to exegetically preaching—explaining the chosen scripture text in detail for his audience.

Lewis was also clearly tied to scriptural texts the following year during his lecture on St. Paul at what became the first of numerous visits to the RAF Chaplains' School, Church of England. The newly formed school was being accommodated at Magdalene College, Cambridge. Lewis's inaugural address there occurred on 27 May,

31 C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, 1960), p. 176.

32 Babbage, 'Royal Air Force', p. 76.

33 Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 3:1072; cf. *The Imitation of Christ*, bk. 2, ch. 12, 'If you cast away one cross, you will find another and perhaps a heavier one'. Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (New York: Cosimo, 2007), p. 41.

34 Babbage, 'Royal Air Force', p. 76.

**Table 3**  
**Known Sunday Sermons by C. S. Lewis (including  
Sunday RAF talks)**

| TIME        | DATE         | TITLE<br>if known                 | PLACE  | TEXT<br>if known           |
|-------------|--------------|-----------------------------------|--|----------------------------|
| PM          | 22 Oct. 1939 | 'Learning in Wartime'             | St. Mary's, Oxford                                     | Deut 26:5 <sup>i</sup>     |
| PM          | 8 Jun 1941   | 'The Weight of Glory'             | St. Mary's, Oxford                                     | Rev 2:26, 28 <sup>ii</sup> |
| Prior to 17 | Aug 1941     | 'Religion: Reality or Substitute' | St. Mary's, Oxford                                     | Heb 10:1 <sup>iii</sup>    |
| AM/PM       | 21 Sept 1941 |                                   | RAF Henlow (spoke 4 times)                             |                            |
| PM          | 29 Mar 1942  | 'Religion and Pleasure'           | Holy Trinity, Headington Quarry                        |                            |
| PM          | 30 Aug 1942  | 'All or Nothing'                  | RAF Yatesbury  |                            |
| AM          | 13 Sept 1942 |                                   | Wesley Chapel, Newquay & RAF Trerew<br>(spoke 3 times) |                            |
| PM          | 27 Sept 1942 | 'Miracles'                        | St. Jude, Hampstead Garden                             |                            |
| AM/PM       | 10 Jan 1943  |                                   | RAF Cottesmore (spoke 2 times)                         |                            |
| AM          | 28 Mar 1943  |                                   | No. 3 ITW, Torquay (spoke 2 times)                     |                            |
| PM          | 4 Apr 1943   | 'Forgiveness'                     | Holy Trinity, Headington Quarry                        |                            |
| AM          | 18 Apr 1943  | 'Making and Begetting'            | RAF Feltwell<br>& RAF Methwold                         | Matt 27:54                 |
| PM          | 18 Apr 1943  | 'Follow Me'                       | RAF Feltwell (spoke 4 times)                           | Matt 16:24                 |
| AM          | 28 May 1944  | 'Transposition'                   | Mansfield College Chapel,<br>Oxford                    | Acts 2:1-11                |
| PM          | 18 Feb 1945  |                                   | Holy Trinity, Headington Quarry                        |                            |
| PM          | 15 Apr 1945  | 'The Grand Miracle'               | St. Jude, Hampstead Garden                             |                            |
| AM          | 15 July 1945 |                                   | St. John's, Horningsham (spoke 2 times)                |                            |
| PM          | 31 Mar 1946  | 'Miserable Offenders'             | Holy Trinity, Headington Quarry                        |                            |
| PM          | 7 Apr 1946   | 'Miserable Offenders'             | St. Matthew's, Northampton                             |                            |
| PM          | 9 Mar 1947   |                                   | Holy Trinity, Headington Quarry                        |                            |
| PM          | 29 Jan 1956  | 'A Slip of the Tongue'            | Magdalene College Chapel, Cambridge                    |                            |

<sup>i</sup> Erik Routey, 'A Prophet' in *Remembering C.S. Lewis: Recollections of Those Who Knew Him*, ed. by James T. Como (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005), p. 106.

<sup>ii</sup> Lewis, 'Glory', p. 263.

<sup>iii</sup> C. S. Lewis, 'Religion: Reality or Substitute' in *Christian Reflections*, ed. by Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), p. 37; cf. Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 2:490.

the morning after he delivered the first of his 1944 Clark Lectures at Trinity College.<sup>35</sup> His Clark Lectures eventually became his most significant academic work: *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama*. But his first lecture at the RAF Chaplains' School started off on a very unpromising note. According to the Rev. (Wing Commander) Charles Gilmore, the school's first Commandant, Lewis chose to speak on the topic, 'Linguistic Analysis in Pauline Soteriology'. If the title alone was not enough to put the crowd to sleep, his delivery was also less than scintillating. Lewis seemed to be hunting for words. In the lull, a future bishop in the audience began filling out *The Times* crossword puzzle. Padre Gilmore wrote that some of these chaplains, 'had returned from the field, some were facing a baptism of fire on a near but unknown D-day'—a mere ten days later, as it turned out.<sup>36</sup> Some,

were nightly seeing off crews who did not return; many were shaken in the concept of their calling, others were finding it for the first time. Action at levels heroic and very raw seemed all-important; theology had been evacuated to safe reception areas.<sup>37</sup>

At such a pivotal moment, the Oxford don had chosen to speak on 'Linguistic Analysis'.

Suddenly, Lewis said something about 'prostitutes and pawn brokers being "Pardoned in Heaven, the first by the throne"'.<sup>38</sup> It was a provocative statement about grace. The exact quote was taken from the last line of Robert Browning's poem 'The Lost Leader': 'Then let him receive the new knowledge and wait us, / Pardoned in heaven, the first by the throne!'.<sup>39</sup> However the oblique reference

35 *Chaplains' School*, April 1944.

36 Charles Gilmore, 'To the RAF', in *C.S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table*, ed. by James T. Como (New York: Macmillan, 1979), p. 189.

37 Green and Hooper, *Revised Biography*, p. 251.

38 Gilmore, 'RAF', p. 189.

39 Robert Browning, 'The Lost Leader', in *Browning's Shorter Poems*, ed. by Franklin T. Baker (New York: Macmillan, 1917), pp. 75-6.



was to the words of Jesus found in Matthew 21:31, 'Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you'. With that rhetorical shift, the room came alive. There was laughter, intellectual give and take, and a forthright engagement with his audience. Here again, Lewis was able to engage more fully with specific scripture texts because the audience was composed of committed believers. In this case, at least, they were also Christians well versed in the biblical text.

The third type of surviving evidence for the RAF talks of C. S. Lewis is 'All or Nothing'.<sup>40</sup> These five, brief paragraphs of notes appear to be what remains of the address he gave at RAF Yatesbury, on 30 August 1942, as part of a series entitled 'Christianity and Society'.<sup>41</sup> It seems that Lewis wanted to concentrate on 'Christianity' while RAF Chaplain Lewis John Collins was increasingly focused on implications related to 'Society'. After a drawn out negotiation of half a dozen letters, Lewis finally agreed to 'talk (roughly) on the relation between Christianity and the social order'.<sup>42</sup> The *Register of Services* (Form 356 B) for RAF Yatesbury records neither this address, nor the other addresses in this series. Padre Collins was experimenting with new a model of Christian community he called, 'The Fellowship of the Transfiguration of Our Lord.' Collins hoped to reach airmen who were indifferent to the church services normally encountered in either military or civilian life. While the airmen who participated in the Fellowship of the Transfiguration were curious about spiritually matters, and formed bonds of loyalty to one another, they were not necessarily committed Christians.

'All or Nothing' was first published in *In Our Tongues*, a book of wartime addresses to the Forces by various Christian authors. It is considerably shorter than the other talks in the collection, and contains some sentences by Lewis that appear particularly truncated. Lewis is known to have delivered sermons from notes

40 C. S. Lewis, 'All or Nothing', in *In Our Tongues*, ed. by James Patrick Stevenson (London: SPCK, 1944), pp. 31-2.

41 Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 2:523-5.

42 Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 2:525.

on occasion.<sup>43</sup> Thus, it may be better to consider ‘All or Nothing’ as sermon notes rather than a complete sermon transcript. In the opening two paragraphs, it bears striking similarity to the 1946 essay Lewis entitled, ‘Man or Rabbit?’.<sup>44</sup> The latter essay focuses on the question, can I lead a good life—the life of transformational goodness—without Christianity? But in ‘All or Nothing’, Lewis calls on his listeners to make a personal choice for Christ and emphasizes the final results of that choice:

There are lots of decent people who aren’t Christians, of course, just as there are lots of decent people who take the wrong trains. But it’s where you’re going to finish up that matters. The wrong train looks just as good as the right one, before it starts. Even after it’s started, it may go the same way as the right one for a considerable distance. But it lets you down in the end.<sup>45</sup>

The long Battle of Stalingrad had begun on 23 August, a week before Lewis visited Yatesbury. A veiled reference to that situation occurs in paragraph four of his notes: ‘Some people...say our Earth is such a small place in the universe that what happens on it couldn’t matter to God, but a small place may be very important in a war. (Stalingrad looks a small place on a map of the world).’<sup>46</sup> In the second paragraph, Lewis makes use of the alternate title for the address which he had suggested to Padre Collins, ‘Christianity isn’t a patent medicine’:

Christianity isn’t a hobby, or even a patent medicine. It makes statements: God exists—man is broken—God became a man—that man can mend all other men—no one else can—those who are not mended go into the dustbin. If these statements are true, they concern everyone, and are of

43 Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 2:638.

44 C. S. Lewis, ‘Man or Rabbit?’, in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. by Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), pp. 108-13.

45 Lewis, ‘*All or Nothing*’, p. 32.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

infinite importance. Either zero—or infinity. Either this wire is not a live wire or else it carries a current of infinite voltage. Christianity can't be moderately important.<sup>47</sup>

RAF Yatesbury was a large training station which housed schools set up to equip airmen in how to operate and repair radio and radar equipment. Lewis appears to have selected the illustration of a 'live wire' with them in mind.

What makes 'All or Nothing' remarkable is Lewis's attempt at a 'Come to Jesus' invitation. That invitation is expressed in military terms: 'Report for duty. Say your first prayer, wherever you happen to be to be, at once. Tell Him you want to join'.<sup>48</sup> Lewis quickly learned that he was simply not good at delivering the 'simple, emotional appeal', and that 'those who, like myself, lack the gift for making it, had better not attempt it'.<sup>49</sup> However this talk is also notable for his pithy summaries of biblical material, delivered in rapid succession like the ack-ack of an anti-aircraft barrage. One way of reconstructing his homiletical approach would be to say that Hebrews 11:6, 'he that cometh to God must believe that he is', becomes 'God exists'. Romans 3:23, 'For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God', becomes 'man is broken'. John 1:14, 'And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us', becomes 'God became a man'. Acts 16:31, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved', becomes 'that man can mend all other men'. John 14:6, 'no man cometh unto the Father, but by me', becomes 'no one else can'. Matthew 25:46, 'And these shall go away into everlasting punishment', becomes, 'those who are not mended go into the dustbin'. Lewis would later write that he believed the best evangelistic approach was 'a team of two: one to deliver the preliminary intellectual barrage, and the other to follow up with

47 *Ibid*, p. 32.

48 *Ibid*, p. 32.

49 C. S. Lewis, 'God in the Dock', in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. by Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 244.

a direct attack on the heart'.<sup>50</sup> At RAF Yatesbury, Lewis showed himself to be marvelously skilled at the former, if not the latter.

The fourth type of evidence for the RAF talks of Lewis is found in the titles of additional addresses mentioned in the Form 356 Bs of various stations, but not mentioned elsewhere. These can be found in Table 4, opposite.

It is tempting to compare these with the titles of some of the wartime BBC radio talks by Lewis. For example, 'Fundamentals of Christian Faith' sounds similar to *'What Christians Believe'*, the title of the second BBC series, while 'Christianity and Civilization' may have covered the same ground as 'Social Morality', the second broadcast in his third BBC series. However, such similarities are speculative at best and can yield no firm conclusions. Without surviving notes or descriptions of their content, no definitive information can be gleaned regarding how Lewis made use of scripture in these talks.

Caution also should be exercised when considering the fifth and final source for the RAF talks of C. S. Lewis: his BBC radio series *'Christian Behaviour'*. Aside from the 17 May 1942 rebroadcast of Lewis's 12 May appearance on the BBC's *'Brains Trust'*,<sup>51</sup> these were the only times Lewis's voice was heard on the BBC Forces Programme (a separate, wartime radio station geared for military personnel). A further complication is that while the radio series was comprised of eight talks, the printed version included four additional talks both in the original volume, *Christian Behaviour*, and in the 1952 combined volume, *Mere Christianity*.<sup>52</sup> While the four extra chapters are in a style similar to the others, it is hard to say with conviction which specific talks of these dozen, if any, were also given as live presentations to RAF personnel. Instead, what remains are the more generalized instructions to Lewis for this series from his BBC producer, Eric Fenn:

50 C. S. Lewis, 'Modern Man and his Categories of Thought', in *Present Concerns: Ethical Essays*, ed. by Walter Hooper (London: Fount, 1986), p. 66.

51 MS, *Any Questions? No. 74 [Brains Trust]*, BBC Written Archive Centre, Caversham Park, Reading, recorded 7 May 1942.

52 Phillips, *Time of War*, pp. 304-5.

**Table 4**  
**Titles of RAF Talks by Lewis**  
**without Surviving Texts or Notes**

| DATE                            | TITLE   | PLACE        |
|---------------------------------|---|--------------|
| 1 Sept 1941 (Mon.)              | 'Fundamentals of Christian Faith'   | RAF Hereford |
| 22 Sept 1941 (Mon.)             | 'Christianity and Civilization'   | RAF Henlow   |
| 8-11 Apr 1942<br>(Wed. to Sat.) | 'Can Christianity Save the Modern World?'<br>and 'Is Atheism Reasonable?' | RAF Cranwell |

I think, however that you have got enough material from your contact with the RAF to know where your particular shoe is apt to pinch, and it is more important that the talks should be related to questions in the minds of people in the forces than to things which bother other people. I think, therefore, that the thing for you to do, is to think first of what you would want today in a series of short talks of this kind to such people in the RAF as might come to hear you, and let us have the result.<sup>53</sup>

Nevertheless, the pertinent question for the present study is also a bit more generalized. When examining a printed version of *Christian Behaviour*, is the pattern of how Lewis made use of scripture here similar to how he used the Bible in his known RAF talks? Do they contain scriptural allusion and paraphrase with only occasional instances of direct quotations and detailed exegesis? In short, the answer is 'yes'. The following two examples are illustrative.

First is a passage from 'Social Morality', the second radio broadcast in the series and chapter 3 of the printed version. The radio talk focused on the application of Golden Rule:

53 Phillips, *Time of War*, pp. 158-9.

Christianity has not, and does not profess to have, a detailed political programme for applying ‘Do as you would be done by’ to a particular society at a particular moment. It could not have. It is meant for all men at all times and the particular programme which suited one place or time would not suit another. And anyhow, that is not how Christianity works. When it tells you to feed the hungry it does not give you lessons in cookery. When it tells you to read the Scriptures it does not give you lessons in Hebrew and Greek, or even in English grammar.<sup>54</sup>

The colloquial phrase, ‘Do as you would be done by’, seems to have originated in 1674 with Robert Godfrey, the man who coined the term ‘the Golden Rule’.<sup>55</sup> Its popularity in Britain may have been due to Charles Kingsley’s children’s fantasy, *The Water-Babies*, in which one of the characters is named, ‘Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby’.<sup>56</sup> Lewis had reread the fantasy in the opening weeks of World War II.<sup>57</sup> Both the name and the phrase are paraphrases of Christ’s words in Luke 6:31, ‘And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise’. Lewis uses this colloquial/literary version throughout his talk while explaining what is meant, and what is not meant, by the Golden Rule. This may be compared to his use of the literary paraphrase, ‘Pardoned in heaven, the first by the throne’, at the RAF Chaplains’ School. In the rest of ‘Social Morality’, Lewis continues to use paraphrases to refer to biblical passages. Thus Romans 12:20, ‘if thine enemy hunger, feed him’, becomes ‘feed the hungry’ and Psalm 119:11, ‘Thy word have I hid in mine heart’, becomes ‘read the Scriptures.’ These may be compared to the rapid-fire, pithy paraphrases delivered at RAF Yatesbury.

54 Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pp. 78-9.

55 Both the term and the phrase first appear in Robert Godfrey, *Various injuries & abuses in chymical and Galenical physick, committed both by physicians & apothecaries, detected: for the benefit of such, who being conscientious and studious in physick, aim chiefly at the welfare of the sick, and of those patients, whether rich or poor, who are willing to preserve their lives & healths* (London: JohnDarby, 1674).

56 Charles Kingsley, *The Water-Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land Baby* (London: Macmillian, 1863).

57 Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II:288.

The second example is taken from “The ‘Cardinal Virtues’”, an essay not included in the original BBC radio series, but later placed by Lewis as the second chapter in the printed version of *Christian Behaviour*. Once again, a pattern of scripture use can be observed here which is also found in the known RAF talks by Lewis. In its third paragraph, as the explanation of the cardinal virtue of prudence begins, Lewis writes:

because Christ said we could only get into His world by being like children, many Christians have the idea that, provided you are ‘good’, it does not matter being a fool. But ...as St. Paul points out, Christ never meant that we were to remain children in *intelligence*: on the contrary, He told us to be not only ‘as harmless as doves’, but also ‘as wise as serpents’. He wants us to be simple, single-minded, affectionate, and teachable, as good children are; but He also wants every bit of intelligence we have to be alert at its job, and in first class fighting trim.<sup>58</sup>

The starting point is a summary of Matthew 18:3, ‘Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven’. Next, he introduces a clarification from St. Paul by summarizing the words of 1 Corinthians 14:20, ‘Brethren, be not children in understanding’. Then the words of Christ from Matthew 10:16 are quoted with greater precision, though in an adjusted order. The Authorized Version has ‘be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves’, while Lewis writes, “‘as harmless as doves,’” but also “‘as wise as serpents’”. Lewis goes from there to discuss the meaning of prudence in greater detail. This includes a quotation from, and a suggested counter point to, Charles Kingsley’s poem, ‘A Farewell’: ‘Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever’.<sup>59</sup> The possible connection to Kingsley’s ‘Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby’, through the phrase ‘Do as you

58 Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pp. 74-5.

59 Charles Kingsley, ‘A Farewell’, in *Andromeda and Other Poems* (London: John W. Parker, 1858), p. 64.

would be done by' in the following chapter of the printed version, is worth noting. The entire third paragraph can be understood as a commentary on and explanation of the opening biblical allusion: 'become as little children'. Similarly, Lewis's evening Palm Sunday sermon at RAF Feltwell was a meditation on and detailed exegesis of Matthew 16:24, 'If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.'

The war work of C. S. Lewis as a Lay Lecturer for the RAF Chaplains Branch extended over a period of four years, three months and one week. He visited dozen of RAF facilities and met with hundreds of chaplains. During World War II, a total of about 1,000 clergy would serve as chaplains with the RAF. On 16 November 2012, the last surviving former RAF chaplain from that era passed away: Stuart Barton Babbage, the young chaplain who had worked with Lewis at Feltwell and Methwald. In 1943, while walking across the Norfolk fens with the Oxford don, Padre Babbage had spoken to Lewis about the latter's traveling ministry. Lewis once described it in these terms: 'Owing to my itinerate lectureship to the R.A.F. (a map of my 'missionary journeys' w[oul]d be as complicated as those maps of St. Paul's wh[ic]h haunted our childhood), I am hardly ever home for more than 3 consecutive nights and unable to arrange anything'.<sup>60</sup> What had compelled him to undertake these exhausting missions to far flung RAF outposts in England, Scotland and Wales? According the Babbage, Lewis said that 'it was worth it to bring encouragement to some lonely chaplain who had been finding the going hard'.<sup>61</sup> Part of that encouragement was how Lewis made use of scripture in these RAF talks.

Through biblical allusions and paraphrases, both colloquial and literary, Lewis translated Holy Writ into everyday language for RAF officers and other ranks. On occasions, particularly when addressing committed believers, he delved deeper into explaining

60 Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II: 492.

61 Babbage, 'Royal Air Force', p. 73.



particular biblical passages. More often, he sent up an intellectual barrage, answering preliminary questions regarding faith, reason, and imagination so that the chaplains' own efforts could be more effective. Sometimes, he spoke on the prescribed scripture text from the *Book of Common Prayer*. On other occasions, he chose a different text. He always hoped to be an encouragement to chaplains. Perhaps the chaplain attached to the RAF No. 3 ITW at Torquay was premature in saying that Lewis had used 'No Text' in 1943 while preaching to those troops. Judging by what is known from his other RAF talks, Lewis used a variety of methods to refer to Holy Writ and communicate the Christian message. The signs are subtle, but clear for all who have eyes to see.



**Figure 1.**

World War II era chapel at RAF Feltwell where C. S. Lewis spoke on 18 April 1943. Photo courtesy of The Airfield Information Exchange. Used by permission.



**Figure 2.**

C. S. Lewis in 1944 when visiting the RAF Chaplains' School, Church of England, located at Magdalene College, Cambridge. The chaplain in front and to the left of Lewis is wearing RAF pilot wings. The others are wearing the wings of the RAF chaplains badge.

