

Great Gale Service 2018

2 Corinthians 4: 3 – 6; Mark 9: 2 – 9

We meet this morning to keep alive and hold before God the story of the Great Gale of February 1871. Yesterday the crew from the Lifeboat and a few folk from the Priory held an act of commemoration with a minute's silence and a wreath-laying at the monument in the Priory graveyard which marks the otherwise anonymous mass grave in which 43 victims of the Great Gale were buried. Normally we conclude the Great Gale service at the Priory with a procession to the monument to perform that commemoration. Yesterday we did it on the actual anniversary of the event and today we have the annual service, but in the splendid setting of this new boat house.

And we're here to tell that story again. And it doesn't matter whether you've been brought up with the story and have heard it retold countless times or whether

this is all new to you. The story deserves to be retold and it is our duty to keep alive the memory of it.

February 9th 1871 was an unseasonably calm day. As a result, an unusually large number of vessels were tempted out from Newcastle into the still seas, to travel down the coast, taking coal to London. Many were frankly unseaworthy; many were overloaded; many had loose cargoes of coal heaped up on deck. Overnight into the 10th February, as the ships passed Bridlington, the wind changed direction, blew up into a hurricane and was accompanied by blinding sleet and snow. 30 vessels were wrecked and 70 sailors lost their lives.

In the midst of all this there are inspiring stories of heroism and courage: the repeated rescue attempts by the lifeboat crews in the 'Harbinger' and the 'Robert Whitworth'; the coastguards who swam out to the nearest wrecks to save ships' crew; the perseverance of lifeboat crew who returned to shore exhausted, with

hands raw and bleeding; and the volunteers who stepped in when the crew was spent.

One of the legacies of the Great Gale was the determination of Christian social reformers such as Lord Shaftesbury to support Samuel Plimsoll in his campaign for the statutory regulation of merchant shipping to protect the health and safety of those who earn their living at the mercy of the forces of nature. However fashionable it may be to laugh at the absurdities of the 'ealf and safety brigade, the memory of how all those people died in the Great Gale, is a timely reminder that the need for zealous reformers is not yet over. And wherever there is need for such zeal, the Christian gospel compels its prophets to speak out fearlessly.

Bridlington is the town, the foundation of whose shred identity is that we are the people who remember the Great Gale. We do so out of respect for those who died. We do so to pay tribute to the courage of the life boat crews, both on that night and throughout the 147

years that have followed. We do so to be reminded of the need to protect those who work in unjust and unsafe conditions. And we do so so that we can pray for and commend to God's protection the members of today's lifeboat crew.

We tell this story of the Great Gale of 1871 in the context of telling another, bigger story. This morning Christians everywhere are telling each other the story Julie Smith, wife of a lifeboat crew member, read to us from St Marks' Gospel: the story of the transfiguration of Jesus. It's the story in which Jesus' special disciples were allowed a foretaste, a glimpse, of the glory that would shine through Jesus at his resurrection. Christians are telling each other that story this Sunday because it's the last Sunday before Lent begins. This week it's Shrove Tuesday, then it's Ash Wednesday, then it's Lent all the way to Easter. It's the season Christians journey with Jesus through the agony of seeing him walk head-on into a rigged trial, get mocked, tortured and then be crucified.

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

This story, Jesus being transfigured to radiate with the glory of God, provides the assurance of light at the end of the tunnel. It's the promise that, if we have the courage to go through Lent with Jesus, all will be well at the end. It's a glimpse of what things can be like with Jesus.

When we remember the heroism of the lifeboat men of the Great Gale; when we remember the selfless way today's crew face danger every time they respond to a shout, we see a glimpse of what humanity can be like at its best. Now I've got to be careful not to turn these blokes into Jesus Christ. They are ordinary, flawed individuals – if you don't believe me, ask their partners. But what I do say is that when we remember, with admiration, the heroes of the Great Gale story, we are pointed towards the greater still story where the ultimate potential of humanity is seen in the divinity of Jesus. And we are invited to participate in that so that the light of Jesus shines in our hearts.

Amen.