

Great Gale Sunday 2019 (10.02.19)

Jeremiah 17: 5 – 10; Luke 6: 17 – 26

Bridlington gathers once again in this mighty Priory Church to retell and remember the Great gale of 1871. It's important that we keep on retelling the story. 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

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not yet over. Indeed it seems that, now, we need not just zealous reformers, but zealous protectors – protectors of safeguards and rights that are vulnerable to erosion in the bid to strike trade deals post-Brexit. And wherever there is need for such zeal, the Christian gospel compels its prophets to speak out fearlessly.

In the second Bible reading today we have not just a prophet, but Jesus himself telling all who will listen that in God's economy there is a special place for the poor, the hungry and those who weep. This town knows what it is to weep. On this morning 148 years ago Bridlington would have been full of weeping. The weeping of the six families of the lifeboat crew who had given their lives would have been particularly acute; but nobody would have been left unaffected. Of course the weeping of the families of the 43, who were buried underneath where the now is, would not have been heard here. Those souls were not from Bridlington. They were from many miles from here,

from Sunderland or Whitstable or Yarmouth or Felixstowe. Their bodies weren't returned to their homes: they were buried in an unmarked mass grave in the town near which they happened to perish. Their families wouldn't have been able to visit. And we can only imagine the hunger and the poverty that ensued from those deaths.

Yet blessed are those who are poor; blessed are those who are hungry; and blessed are those who weep. We bless them now – nearly 150 years later - by honouring their memory. And we bless them now through the selfless commitment of members of our community who work voluntarily as lifeboat crew today; and by ensuring that the crew has available to them the highest standards of equipment and technology.

But, above all, we bless their memories by coming here, to this holy place, year by year to acknowledge our own frailty. We heard Julie read the prophet Jeremiah telling us “Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make their flesh their strength.” We

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know that no matter how much trust *we* put in millions of pounds worth of boat and launch and recovery systems, there is nothing we can do to tame those seas and to eliminate the risk to anybody who goes out on them. We can only, ultimately, put our trust in God and depend on his mercy. And as we salute our lifeboat crew today, it is to god's mercy and protection that we commend them.

Amen.