

Great Gale Service 2020

1 Corinthians 2: 1 – 12; Matthew 5: 13 – 20

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 – and I make no apology for doing so. 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.

This is a story of loss and suffering which is to be commemorated with solemnity, but it is also a story of the heroism of people whom Jesus would describe as the salt of the earth. And today is a day when we don't want to hide their lamp under a bushel but want to celebrate and give thanks for it. The lifeboat crew of 1871, just like today's, responded simply because people were in need, without making any prior enquiry about who they were or where they were from; whether they were deserving of being rescued; or

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whether they were the sort of people we want associated with our town. They responded because people were in need, full stop. You could say they were doing unto others what they hoped others would do unto them. And that summarises all the laws that are in the Bible.

We've just heard it proclaimed in our second Bible reading that Jesus came to fulfil that law. It would be blasphemous to suggest that the crew of the 1871 lifeboat, let alone today's crew, were the perfect embodiment of Jesus Christ, but there is real insight in the observation that in the unconditional selfless service of others, which is the hallmark of the RNLI, there is a glimpse of Christlikeness. Today we name that, acknowledge it and give thanks for it.

And then there's the role of this church in the tragic tale. This service will conclude with a procession to the Great Gale monument in the churchyard for an act of commemoration. That monument marks the place

where 43 of those who lost their lives the Great Gale were buried. The Priory's Elizabeth Boardman, who is a retired professional archivist, has been researching those burials. They weren't all buried at once. Because bodies were being washed up from the sea over quite a long period there were a number of burials over a number of months. At the largest burial, though, on the 14th February, 23 people were all buried at once. Their bodies were all brought up from the yard behind the Albion pub on Hilderthorpe Road, which was being used as a temporary make-shift mortuary. And it wasn't simply a question of a committal at the graveside. The coffins were brought into church for a funeral service and were all lined up on forms before being carried back out into the churchyard as the Dead March was played on the organ. Just imagine: 23 coffins in church all at the same time.

But the point is that they were all, together with the other 20, they were all given a holy rest in this place,

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most of them a long, long way from home and many of them unnamed. But the Priory was here for them. I would like to think that the Priory is here today for anybody and everybody. Certainly, if it is being faithful to its calling, it will be.

This tale, now 149 years old, is one which reminds us all of our calling, whether as RNLI crew or as a worshipping community. Let it be our prayer that the Spirit of God will be upon us so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us and faithfully respond to them.

Amen.