

Great Gale Sunday 2021 – the 150th anniversary
Proverbs 1: 22 – 31; John 1: 1 – 14

As I said in my introductory comments, today is Great Gale Sunday. In any year, that is a major event in the Priory's calendar; a set-piece event with a full church; one of those occasions when the wider community stakes its claim on the life of the Priory; and when shared memory is articulated by the voice of faith in the public square. This year, the 150th anniversary of the Great Gale of 1871, the Archbishop of York had accepted the invitation to take part in even bigger and better celebrations than normal. Our inability to welcome Archbishop Stephen to the Priory for the first time is a bitter pill to have to swallow with the coronavirus restrictions.

It is important, though, that we do not neglect the occasion, but rather be faithful to our duty to keep telling the story, to honour the memory of all who died

on that night and to be reminded of the lessons that keep on needing to be re-learnt in every generation.

The Great Gale took place on the night between the 9th and 10th February 1871, and this is what happened. 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 and beyond. 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, they took refuge in the bay because a storm had come from the north east. Flamborough Head was sheltering them. But the wind changed direction, spun round to be from the south east, blew up into a hurricane and was accompanied by blinding sleet and snow. The ships were smashed against Sewerby cliffs and the promenade wall at Bridlington. 30 vessels were wrecked and 70 or so sailors lost their lives.

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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.

Of those 70 or so who died on that night – and we can't be absolutely sure how many did – 43 are buried in the churchyard of this church, Bridlington Priory. 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. Can you imagine a cortège of 23 horses and carts making its way up

St. John's Street, each bearing a coffin? One of the plans for marking this 150th anniversary was to re-enact that procession. And when they arrived at church, 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.

This is an event which is engraved on the collective memory of Bridlington. Part of the identity of Bridlington is indeed that it is the town that remembers the Great Gale. It was, though, not just a local event. The ships that were lost were registered to ports up and down the length of the east coast. But the bodies of those who died were not repatriated to their grieving families in Sunderland, or Whitby, or Felixstowe, or Whitstable. They were simply dragged ashore and the good people of this town ensured they had a decent, Christian funeral and were provided with

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a final resting place, far from home, in a shady corner of the churchyard of this ancient church. There were no headstones engraved with their names, but their collective loss was later commemorated by the erection of the Great Gale monument over the place they were buried.

And if those souls were being mourned in the hearths of cottages the length of the country, the message of the scandal of their loss was being echoed down the corridors of power at the heart of the nation. For years the Christian social reformer, Samuel Plimsoll had been campaigning for the statutory regulation of merchant shipping in order to mitigate precisely the sort of tragedy which unfolded here in 1871. His efforts, at best, had come up against deaf ears, and at worst had been cynically resisted by those with vested interests in inflating the profits of shipping companies. The nationwide outrage at the avoidable deaths of so many at Bridlington was a clarion call that garnered support for his campaign. Merchant shipping was

regulated; health and safety measures were introduced. The Plimsoll line, which is still used today in international shipping, is the direct result of the Great Gale of Bridlington in 1871. Every life that has been saved, across the world, because ships have not been overloaded beyond the Plimsoll line, is a tribute to the lives of those who were washed ashore and buried at this place 150 years ago.

What has the Christian faith to say to all this? Well the Christian faith has been speaking throughout the story. It is the Christian faith that ensured those bodies were given care and dignity. It is the Christian faith that provided the language and the ritual with which to afford them the dignity of a proper funeral. It is the Christian faith that provided the hallowed ground so their final resting place could be commemorated. It is the Christian faith that inspired and empowered Samuel Plimsoll to transform the tragedy of their loss into an agent for justice and reform. And it is the

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Christian faith that provides scriptures to illuminate our response.

It would of course be crass to read the Book of Proverbs in a way that suggests that when “panic strikes like a storm” and “calamity comes like a whirlwind” it is because God is vengeful and angry. But it is entirely right to say that when we see avoidable loss of life, as we did here in February 1871, it is because we have hated knowledge, chosen not to fear the Lord, had none of his counsel and have despised his reproof. The lesson of the Great Gale is to heed the call of Proverbs to stop being simple, to stop delighting in scoffing and to stop cynically rejecting expert opinion. The sonorous prologue to St. John’s Gospel explains how and why: because “the Word became flesh and lived among us and we have seen his glory.”

The collect we prayed earlier in this service just happen to be the collect for this Sunday, the Second

Sunday before Lent, but it couldn’t more concisely collect our thoughts and our prayer on this 150th anniversary of the Great Gale of Bridlington Bay:

Almighty God,
give us reverence for all creation
and respect for every person,
that we may mirror your likeness
in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.