

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 27th February 2022

“Dudley”, “Eunice”, “Franklin” – they have been very unwelcome visitors to our shores these past days, bringing untold destruction and devastation to individuals and communities, as each of these storms tore across our country. And I hear that there is another one on the way! I shall be tuning in to the BBC Weather forecasts to hear what Darren Bett has in store for us as he points at the isobars and arrows and wind speeds over the map of the United Kingdom. I knew that my O Level Geography would come in handy one day.

When I was returning from conducting a funeral service in London a few years ago, the plane journey from Heathrow to Glasgow was a tad bumpy to say the least, and the excessive turbulence shook not only the aircraft but also a few of the passengers whose faces mirrored how they were feeling.

The lady sitting next to me had obviously noticed my clerical collar, and she asked rather anxiously, “Here, you have connections! Couldn’t you do something about this?”

To which I replied, “I’m sorry, I’m only in sales, not management!”

That certainly eased her tension a little till we were safely on terra firma!

Little did she know that my fear was just as great as hers!

Friends who were returning from Nice this past week were telling me that they had never experienced such a frightening landing as they made their descent to London Heathrow, and when the British Airways Airbus touched the runway, after being buffeted about in the approach, every passenger burst out into spontaneous applause, grateful that the Flight Crew had done their job superbly in such awful meteorological conditions.

When our weather gets really wild, we human beings feel like very small players, tossed around by terrible forces which often can seem exceptionally terrifying.

Some of you will have seen the film, “The Perfect Storm”, starring George Clooney, the story about the encounter of the New England fishing fleet with the storm of the century.

Away back in 1991, a rare combination of forces came about very quickly, and without warning, to create the worst of all possible storms, with hurricane force winds and 100 foot waves.

The story plunges you into the lives of the fishing crews, telling of some boats that survived and of some that didn’t, and of the heroic Coast Guard rescue.

I have to confess that I never have had sea legs. In the summer of 1984, six months into my second parish of Girvan North Church, the new lifeboat was being dedicated and, as one of the local clergy, I was invited to the ceremony. It was a beautiful day, blue skies, not a cloud, the harbour looking very picturesque filled with several pleasure craft and fishing boats, and, of course, the splendid new lifeboat in its bold proud RNLI colours.

There were many local folk and visitors who were present, as well as dignitaries, who had come to enjoy this rare occasion.

After the official duties had all been carried out and the tea served and the Paris buns consumed, the crowd began to disperse and I was invited to come on board to see around the pristine new vessel, moored to the harbour wall, adjacent to the Lifeboat Station.

I accepted enthusiastically – that was a very bad idea.

No sooner had I gone below deck and the Coxswain was explaining what all the new instrumentation involved, his voice became more and more distant, and my face became more and more green.

Even though the boat was moored to the quay, because it was constructed of very light materials, it was still bobbing up and down in the slight swell of the harbour.

I hastily excused myself, climbed back on deck and on to the harbour side, taking deep breaths of the fresh Girvan air to take away my nausea.

I never did volunteer to join the Crew during my sojourn in the town.

I still am not good at all on boats of any size or description, so cruising holidays with Cunard, or Royal Caribbean, are not on my bucket list – I might just be persuaded to go on the ferry to Millport!

My dear late Dad, who served in the Fleet Air Arm on the Atlantic Convoys in the Second World War, could never understand my reluctance to go down to the sea in ships! He had a passion for all things maritime since his boyhood days when, in the summer months, he worked with Halliday's who owned the little rowing boat and motor boats that once graced the front at Largs, and which could be hired by holiday makers for half an hour to enjoy being out on the Firth, all the while avoiding the queue of steamers approaching the pier!

Even if I did have sea legs, I would certainly have thought twice about going aboard the sword fishing boat, the Andrea Gail, which features in George Clooney's film.

Of course, that feeling of being out of control doesn't just happen when you are being tossed about on the ocean or when you are sitting in a metal tube 32,000 feet in the air.

Sometimes the powers that are tossing you about in the middle of your days can seem just as frightening

The crisis in Ukraine, as I write, seems just like the perfect storm. What exactly is President Putin planning as he confronts the forces of NATO? One of my nieces to whom I spoke

earlier today on FaceTime was expressing her anxiety about what is going to transpire in that part of the world.

Since the Pandemic struck us two years ago, the economy has been taking on water very fast and folk are feeling their tiny boats pitching as the cost of living and fuel costs spiral.

A friend has just been diagnosed with terminal liver cancer and he and his wife and family are trying to keep their heads above water as they confront this devastating news.

The seas toss and the winds blast.

Even our beloved Church of Scotland is trying to stay afloat in the darkness of uncertainty, buffeted by the hurricanes of unbelief and secularism and apathy.

I am sure that you, like me, ask yourself if God is fast asleep, just like Jesus in the fishing boat that was caught up in the squall as it crossed the Sea of Galilee.

Doesn't He care that we feel that we are sinking, that we are about to drown?

That is what those terrified fishermen who were in the boat with Jesus that day asked, "Master, do you not care that we are perishing?"

Will the sun ever shine again in my life?

Will the waves ever be calmed?

Will we ever feel secure in our family life, our Church life, our national life?

Friends, all I can ask you to do, as I do, is to cling to Christ.

Whatever storm you are facing just now, hold fast to Him

He is Lord of the storm. He is the only One who can bring us peace and serenity.

He alone can guide us to a safe harbour.

There is a hymn I love which has the verse,

"When darkness seems to veil His face,

I rest on His unchanging grace;

In every high and stormy gale,

My anchor holds within the veil:

On Christ the solid rock, I stand;

All other ground is sinking sand."

The Revd Fraser R Aitken, Locum Minister