



THE ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY



versary at Westminster Abbey.

Dean and Chapter of Westminster/Picture Partnership

Come Holy Spirit and fill our hearts with the fire of your love. Amen. Please do be seated.

200 years ago, at this hour, Archbishop Charles Manners-Sutton, Archbishop of Canterbury, took the chair at the initial meeting of the RNLI. It is a huge privilege and I am grateful to the Dean for permitting me to preach and to the RNLI for the invitation. I hope you don't regret it.

Of all the aims of the RNLI, the best known is what Sir William Hillary in that beautifully read appeal to the nation called "the preservation of human lives from shipwreck": or in modern parlance, "to save life at sea". What does the institution do? It saves life at sea. It is as simple as that and as hard as that.

For 200 years it has sought to save, to salvage, to heal, to protect. It has done so in war and peace, for friend and foe. It has done so in every condition of the sea and in every condition of human beings. It has done so whether for the crews of great three masted clippers, through the steam ships to the refugees and asylum seekers of today.

It has done so at great cost of life. Sir William Hillary indicated that in his initial appeal. And even without thinking very hard we remember the boats from places like Fraserburgh, Penlee, Caister, and that is but a handful. Those who go out when the pagers or the phones call risk their lives as the appeal said for those who are not known to them. They are rewarded but they are rewarded with admiration, at best a gold medal, or a letter on vellum, or simply and perhaps most importantly the weeping gratitude of those plucked from certain death. How well the poem we'll hear later was written of someone waiting for a rescue.

What you do, you save life at sea.

At sea! The sea that is so calm and quiet until it isn't. And when it isn't then there is no fury to match the sea enraged. Ten years ago, I taken out on the modern Penlee lifeboat to lay a wreath at sea near the cliffs where her predecessor was destroyed by a wave of not far short of a hundred foot throwing her against the cliffs. On board on that beautiful calm day was the son of one of those who had been lost, - nothing unusual about that for generation after generation follow in service, come life or death. What extraordinary people the crews are. I remember when I grew up sailing on the North Norfolk coast the family of Blogg of Cromer were legends of that area in many ways! Not saints, very often, but saviours of life, certainly. Dover is another station I have visited and found generational faithfulness amidst demands that they can never have imagined when they began.

The readings for this day pick up the moods of the sea. Psalm 107 is as is happens my favourite psalm although I didn't choose it. I am sure that the Psalmist had been at sea in a storm. The people of Israel saw the sea as a place of chaos and danger. Almost all stories of the sea in the Bible involve shipwreck or monsters. They didn't like it.

But the Psalmist also certainly knew about sea sickness; as I was told on one memorable occasion in the English Channel and I am sure you all know this in sea sickness the first phase is thinking you are going to die and the second is hoping you are going to die. The description of the storm in that Psalm is so vivid, the staggering up and down as the boat is thrown around by the great waves, the fear and terror at the power unleashed and how small we are, and then salvation when the storm calms.

So also, with the reading from Mark's gospel. Again, it is vivid, it is short and clear. One person only in that small boat is calm, it is Jesus, and the disciples experienced on the sea of Galilee were probably muttering the old cliché that if you can remain calm when all around are panicking, then you probably haven't understood the seriousness of the situation.

Jesus is indeed asleep. The disciples are used to the water, but this storm is different. It is malevolent, seeking to destroy them. But as in Psalm 107, God has other ideas. The disciples do not know who they have in the boat. The last words of that reading say that, who is this? The sailors of Psalm 107 500 years earlier do not know who controls the creation, but they find out.

There are a few saints in the RNLI, I suspect. But there are many saviours of those perishing at sea. But the readings tell us that the cosmos, the creation, the sea knows only one God and Lord of all. That is not a Saviour, but the Saviour. Jesus Christ saves those who are perishing amidst the terrors of parts of this world, drowning in the security of other parts, living their lives not knowing that God exists, loves them and offers hope and life.

The central message of the Christian faith is not morality. It is that those who need saving from the deep waters of death through which we all pass have only one person who has navigated those waters, who has been consumed by them and yet risen from the dead. Jesus Christ.

In Old and New Testament those who are lost call for help regardless of rank. At sea, in a foundering ship, or one on the rocks, neither wealth nor poverty, position nor significance matter. All are equally in peril, and all are utterly dependent on those who come, at the risk of their own lives, to save those who are lost.

The RNLI is a beautiful image and call to self-giving. It imitates the grace of God who in the person of Jesus who lived in the first century and through his reconciliation, holds out his hand to those who seek saving. We need only cry like the disciples, Lord help us, we perish.

200 years is something extraordinary to celebrate. A common purpose for 200 years is almost unknown. Saving life is the most precious gift of all, and the basis of these gifts in the life and self-giving of God is a model for everyone. So, as it shows that model, may God continue to bless and protect those who serve in the RNLI.

Amen.

