

Remembrance Sunday 2017, Canongate Kirk.

St Mark 10:32 *Jesus was walking ahead of them...*

“To boldly go where no man has gone before” is probably the most famous split infinitive in the history of the English language. It was also of course the original if ungrammatical motto of Star Trek, and the regular mission of the Starship Enterprise under the command of Captain James Kirk, to boldly go where no man has gone before. On the back page of this morning’s service sheet is a photograph of another Captain James Kirk, on whose mission as an army chaplain during the First World War I would like to focus briefly this morning. Not because he boldly went where no man had gone before, but because he boldly went where many had gone before and yet whose fate did not deter him.

The Reverend James Kirk was the minister of Dunbar Parish Church, the church of my youth and boyhood and his story has always struck a very personal chord with me not just because of the Dunbar connection but because he too was a graduate of St Andrews and Edinburgh Universities, because he once ministered in a Perthshire parish and because he too joined the Army as a chaplain. But the simple point I want to make this morning as these centenary years of the First World War roll on towards their conclusion on Sunday 11th November next year, is that James Kirk did not join the Army until 1915 and is typical of all those who like him were not part of the first eager and enthusiastic wave of innocent troops that set off in the summer of 1914, to boldly go where no man had gone before, but who joined up later and set off for the battlefields of France when the war was well underway, to boldly go not where no man had gone before, but where many had gone and fought and died in the most appalling of circumstances and conditions, to boldly go knowing full well what lay in store for them.

James Kirk joined up at the end of April 1915 when the Battle of Loos was already well underway and news of its terrible impact particularly on Scottish battalions would already have reached home to some extent. Nevertheless he became chaplain to the Second Battalion the Seaforth Highlanders, with whom he was to serve three harrowing tours of duty on the frontline in France. In 1917 in the middle of his second tour he was awarded a Military Cross, an unusual distinction for a non-combatant, but it was during his third tour, on 29th March 1918, that he was badly wounded and died two days later in hospital in Wimereux, leaving a wife and daughter at home in Dunbar, though of course the Manse could not be their home for much longer. I’ve always had a notion of making my way to the war cemetery at Wimereux to stand by James Kirk’s grave a hundred years after he died, but it turns out 1st April 2018 is Easter Sunday and I probably ought to be on duty here. Perhaps I’ll go another time, and perhaps on reflection the Easter connection is a more important one than mine.

At least it brings us back to our text and our extract from St Mark’s Gospel, where Jesus is boldly going up to Jerusalem and walking ahead of the disciples following anxiously in his wake. Jesus is ahead of them in more ways than one, for he knows exactly what lies in store for him and tells them in no uncertain terms: *See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over... and they will condemn him to death; then they will ... mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; after three days he will rise again.* James Kirk, Minister of that very Gospel, represents not just those who went to war under no illusion, but those who went with every certainty, that in their anxiety and in their agony, in their dying and in their rising again, *Jesus was walking ahead of them...* May we know that certainty still and may God bless to us this preaching of his most holy word, and to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be all praise and glory now and forever. Amen.