

Sunday 13th August 2017, 9th after Trinity. Canongate Kirk.

St Matthew 14:24 *for the wind was against them.*

In the hope that the congregation might be vaguely impressed at the lengths to which I am prepared to go in pursuit of a summer sermon illustration, I have now been to the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo 2017 not once but twice. This year's theme is Splash of Tartan, although it seems to me that might be the theme every year except this August it has been aligned with Scotland's current Year of History, Heritage and Archaeology and focusses on the role that clans and their chiefs have played over the centuries, not least in the age of the Jacobites. This year the Royal Navy has a leading role, lending a maritime theme as well as several bands of Her Majesty's Royal Marines. Other performers from as far afield as Japan, India, the United States of America, France and the Shetland Islands all bring their own splash of tartan and weave an impressively colourful and multi-cultural pattern across the esplanade. And high above, in his solitary post on the ramparts of Edinburgh Castle, the lone piper still provides a poignant highlight in every sense, with his haunting lament.

One of the benefits of going more than once is the opportunity you get to compare the different evenings – not so much the performance, which is to a consistently high standard throughout the run, but the atmosphere, which can vary greatly. That can depend partly on who's in the audience – last Monday, for instance, there was a large contingent of American college students in the stand and they whooped and cheered and eventually galvanised the entire audience of 8 or 9000 into a standing ovation, which at least in my experience is quite a rare thing. But the most critical component of all when it comes to the atmosphere is the simply the weather on the night. I once went on two consecutive nights, which I think was probably above and beyond the call of duty, and the atmosphere was quite different from one to the next, because the weather was quite different from one to the next. The commentator told me afterwards that if it's warm and dry, all is well, but even if it rains the crowd rallies to the cause and won't let their spirits get dampened. But when it's cold, with a cool wind blowing in from the sea, that's when he struggles to whip up a real sense of enthusiasm among the audience. Last Monday I'm glad to say was a perfect night with a clear sky and a good sunset, and it made all the difference, whereas the opening night the previous Friday there was a cold wind as well as passing showers and the atmosphere was not nearly so good. What a difference the weather makes!

Which brings me at last to the Gospel reading set for today with its own maritime theme, and to our text from St Matthew 14:24, *for the wind was against them*, the wind was against them. It must have got up quickly and rather unexpectedly, this wind. Today's familiar passage follows on from last week's equally familiar account of the feeding of the 5000 by the lakeside. When that was done, St Matthew tells us that Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him back to the other side while he dismissed the crowds. He can't have been unduly concerned about the weather for the crossing or he wouldn't have let them go without him. It was late at night but they were fishermen most of them and they were more than familiar with the night tides and they must have set off with confidence. But in due course, we are told, by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. It sounds a bit like the other time when Jesus was with them in the boat and a storm flared up suddenly you remember and they thought they were going to drown and Jesus had to calm the storm and still the waves. And here again he has to come to them to reassure them but the sight of him walking over the water only adds to their fear and anxiety. They were terrified, saying "It is a ghost". Even Peter is daunted by the strong wind

and begins to sink and it is only when Jesus reaches out and catches him and pulls him into the boat that the wind ceases and the waves are still. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying "Truly you are the Son of God". What a difference the weather makes. When the wind is against them everything else is too and they're seeing ghosts and crying out in fear. But when Jesus calms the storm, when the wind drops and the waves ease, faith overcomes fear and all is well again. Truly you are the Son of God.

I wonder if my experience of the tattoo is a little bit like all our experience of church, that much depends on the weather, not literally of course but metaphorically. That how we approach it and how we appreciate it and what we take away from it depends largely on how we feel at the time, whether we feel that all is calm in our lives or whether we feel that the wind is against us and we are far from the safety of the shore, isolated and adrift. That main part of the church building where the congregation sits is called the nave, which comes from the Latin *Navis* meaning ship, and there is perhaps a sense in which coming onboard for worship as it were, we can seek sanctuary and stability whatever the conditions beyond these walls, however strong the wind against us, the tide against us, the odds against us.

*Jesus calls us! O'er the tumult of our life's wild restless sea,
Day by day his voice is sounding, saying "Christian, follow me".*

Jesus spoke to them and said "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid". When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. *For the wind was against them*, but now the wind ceased and those in the boat worshipped him, saying Truly you are the Son of God. In his reassurance they found understanding; in his presence they found peace. Whatever the wind against us today, whatever our struggle and whatever our fear, may the reassurance of the Son of God bring us understanding, and may his presence in this place bring us peace. And now 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.