29th January, 2023 – Princess Victoria 70th Anniversary Service – Genesis 1:1-9 / Mark 4:35-41

**CONNECTIONS – I was born 8 years after the loss of the Princess Victoria which happened on Saturday 31st January, 1953. And yet I can count several personal connections with the events of that tragic day which we are commemorating here in St Annes’ Cathedral this afternoon.**

**My mother, training as a Domestic Science teacher, was the 1st student at Belfast Technical College to be awarded the Jackson Salver. This award was given in memory of Miss AVE Jackson, Senior Inspector in Domestic Science with the NI Department of Education. Hers was one of the lives lost when the first life boat was launched from the sinking ship. It was the lifeboat with all the women and children aboard. And it was the lifeboat that was dashed against the hull of the ship. No woman or child survived.**

**And the street where I currently live in Belfast, is next to the road where J Maynard Sinclair lived in Deramore Park South. Major Sinclair was Minister for Finance and Deputy Prime Minister of Northern Ireland. And he, along with Sir Walter Smiles, MP for North Down, were among the most high profile passengers on the Princess Victoria to lose their lives that day.**

**And finally, for 18 years I was Rector of Larne. It is the home port to so many of the Princess Victoria’s crew, along with the crew of her sister ship, the Princess Margaret. So it was that I, like Larne clergy before and since, would stand each year at the Chaine Road Memorial in Larne on 31st January, in all weathers, but usually in atrocious weather, to remember those 137 souls who were lost at sea on that day: from Larne, from Stranraer, from Belfast and from across the British Isles.**

**Connections: There were many connections which came together that day 70 years ago. There was the fact that the Princess Margaret, sister ship to the Princess Victoria, had been sailed to dry dock in Holyhead for repairs. So it was that many of the crew of the Princess Margaret were travelling home to Larne on that early morning sailing.**

**There were those who worked for Short and Harland at their aircraft factory at Wig Bay, near Stranraer. Each was returning home to Belfast on their regular 2 week rotation.**

**Some had been visiting family, or were travelling to attend a funeral, or bringing home a new fiancée to meet the family. Others were travelling for business, and some were travelling to military postings across Northern Ireland.**

**But each one of these individuals, the 44 crew members and passengers, who survived, and the 137 men, women and children who were lost, each was connected by planning or chance to be on board the Princess Victoria as she left the rail side pier in Stranraer and set sail into the relatively calm waters of Loch Ryan.**

**Why is it that the events of that day still resonate with us so powerfully 70 years later? Perhaps it is because so many of us have made that same sea crossing ourselves. Perhaps it is because so many of those lost, left behind families and children, who remain our neighbours, and some of you may be present today. Perhaps it is because we all wonder to ourselves, “How would I react in such a situation and prepare to jump into the ice cold sea?”**

**Connections: some of our connections will be current and personal: those familiar with this sea crossing, those who serve in the Merchant Navy, or those who are members of the Lifeboat crews which stand ready around our shores. But some of those connections will be emotional, as today we remember – together - powerfully.**

**Which brings me to my second word for today’s service: Respect.**

**All those who live by the sea, whether as seafarers, or those who travel by sea, or simply those who live close to the sea, each will be one who RESPECTS the sea.**

**In the very 1st verses of the Book Genesis, God is shown at work in creation. And in those verses which we have heard this afternoon, we find both the WATERS of creation, and the WIND of creation. Today’s translation put it like this “The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the deep, while a Wind from God swept over the face of the waters”. Other translations tell that “the Spirit of God hovered over the waters”. But to the writers of these words, the “breath of God”, and the Wind of God, and the creating Spirit of God, were one and the same. Here we confront the full power of God at work in the initial act of creation (what modern science describes as the moment of the Big Bang).**

**And whenever in the bible the Hebrew writers want to express the raw power of God at work, they often employ the image of the wind at its most powerful extreme.**

**When the disciples of Jesus, all experienced sailors, were hit by a ferocious storm, so that the boat was being swamped by waves, they cried out to Jesus, asleep on a cushion in the stern ,“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”**

**But Jesus answered their fear, and their question about who he was, by commanding the wind “Be at peace” and the sea “Be Still”. Here was the power of God himself at work, calming the forces of nature and the power of creation from destructive violence to obedient stillness.**

**When we forget the power of nature; when a ship sets sail in seas which are more powerful than the engineering of flimsy stern doors; when we forget our call to serve creation and instead let loose the destructive impact of global warming with its greater risk of violent storms at sea, then we have forgotten God’s call for every person to Respect, not only Creation, but also the Creator.**

**The Psalmist wrote “He made the storm to be still, and the waves of the sea were calm. Then were they glad because they were at rest, and he brought them to the haven they desired.”**

**Connections. Respect. And finally Courage.**

**Today we also gather to acknowledge the Courage of all those who on that day answered the call to rescue as many as they could. We acknowledge the courage of Radio Operator, David Broadfoot, who stayed at his post to the end, to transmit the morse and radio signals which would finally locate the drifting ship, not off Corsewell Point in Scotland, but now 12 miles North North East of the Copeland Islands. We remember the crew members who stood aside in their attempt to save the women and children. We acknowledge the courage of the Navy and merchant ships which braved the dangers of open waters to answer the SOS calls of distress. And we salute the heroism of the RNLI Lifeboat crews aboard the Jeanie Speirs, launched from Portpatrick in Scotland, and the Sir Samuel Kelly, launched from Donaghadee. On that dreadful day, so clearly remembered by so many, there were acts of courage and heroism which many of us can only wonder at. And wonder that if we were in the same situation, would we react in the same way?**

**Today, for this service, we have gathered in the Nave of this cathedral. The Nave is God’s rescue vessel, with Christ as Coxswain , to save all those who have the COURAGE to jump in by faith. The example set by the rescuing lifeboat crews and ships crews 70 years ago for the saving of souls, is the most powerful example there is of self denying action which points us to the saving power of Jesus, as the Lord and Saviour of all.**

**Today as we recognise our Connections, as we return our Respect to the God of creation, and as we salute the Courage of those who were sent to save every person they found adrift in the sea, may we commit to God’s keeping all those who are still marked by the events of that day. And may we commit to God’s care, each soul lost that day to the sea, but gathered into the care of Jesus Christ, whose eternal command is that the seas be stilled, and the wind be at peace. AMEN**