

St Nicholas Parish Church

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 7th March 2021

Initially, I saw two of them, very hardy souls, several weeks ago, when I was out for my daily walk on our marvellous Prom – my refreshing constitutional has been such a blessing during all of this Pandemic. I always meet someone for a chat, and the ever changing conditions on the Firth make it such an exhilarating experience. I have seen it when the waves were crashing over the sea wall, and other days, when not even a zephyr disturbed the surface of the waters. And the colours of the late afternoon sky have been breath taking on many occasions. It is of little wonder that the Princess Royal once remarked that, though she had been all over the civilised globe, nowhere beats the west of Scotland for a sunset!

Then yesterday, I saw six of them – perhaps because the weather was so lovely.

Wild water swimmers! Brave souls venturing out into the freezing waters of the Clyde, no matter the conditions.

I wonder if it is classified as an “extreme sport”? If not, it should be!

I know that it is becoming an ever increasing popular form of exercise, but I have to confess, though I admire the participants, I prefer to watch them from the safety of dry land and admire their tenacity and courage to brave such icy conditions!

Extreme sports, I believe, include, most of the time, dangerous feats of skill – snowboarding down steep mountains; surfing and windsurfing in 50-foot-high seas; bicycle stunt riding; rock climbing up treacherous cliffs, peaks of smooth stone.

I think wild water swimming should be in that list somewhere – after all, it takes a great deal of nerve to plunge yourself into the Clyde in the middle of winter!

There seems to be in the human psyche this need for adventure; this passion to get the adrenalin pumping and the heart racing; this desire to take risks.

Look back over the pages of our history books and some of the greatest people who ever lived were risk takers.

When the explorer, Ernest Shackleton, was looking for men to travel with him to discover the South Pole, he placed an advertisement in a newspaper, which read,

“Men wanted for hazardous journey. Low wages. Long hours.”

And that ad drew 5000 applications.

And when a journalist asked Shackleton, “Why do you want to go to such a forbidding ice continent?”, he paused and then replied, “The fascination of placing the first footmarks.”

I am sure, like me, you can understand that.

Think of the men and women who have placed footmarks on the annals of our story.

Those astronauts, who away back in July 1969, were the first to set foot on the surface of the moon.

And there are people like Sir Edmund Hilary and Sherpa Tensing, reaching the top of the world on conquering Mount Everest.

Christopher Columbus, the Italian explorer, setting off into the unknown across the Atlantic, and so opening the way for European exploration and the colonization of the Americas.

Amelia Earhart, the aviation pioneer, the first female to fly solo across the Atlantic.

Captain Cook, the British explorer, famous for his three voyages in the uncharted Pacific Ocean and Australia in particular (and by the way, though born in a wee village in Yorkshire, his father was a Scot!)

The list goes on and on. Men and women from ordinary backgrounds, who took risks and revealed new vistas to the world.

The truth is that we don't change the world by playing it safe.

We don't improve the lot of others by staying put.

Think for a moment of what risk takers the early followers of Jesus were – they were putting their lives on the line by being Christians.

They were liable to be beaten and tortured and thrown to the wild beasts and torn limb from limb for the entertainment of the Emperor.

They were thrown into prison for declaring their allegiance to the Man of Nazareth.

But they still persisted. Nothing would dissuade them. It was extreme faith.

I suppose that if there is any sin of which you and I are guilty is that we play it safe when it comes to our faith.

And perhaps, what we Presbyterians need in 2021, when the Church is facing dire threats on all sides, is a healthy dose of extreme faith.

Maybe we have made being a Christian too easy.

We have made being a Christian, a Church member, too comfortable, too convenient, and gone is the sense of adventure. Our faith has lost its edge.

And, as a result, many congregations simply muddle along, with nothing very exciting happening to make folk sit up and take notice and have a sharp intake of breath.

Yet, there are many parts of the world today, where the Church is growing and, at the same time, it can cost you your job, your pension, your freedom, and even your life, to confess the Christian faith.

In the middle of the 19th century, a missionary society in London wrote to Dr David Livingstone, deep in the heart of Africa, and asked, "Have you found a good road to where you are? If so, we would like to know so that we can send other men to join you."

Livingstone wrote back, "If you have men who will only come if there is a good road, I don't want them. I want men who will come if there is no road at all."

The Christian life, the Christian journey should fill us with excitement and a sense of adventure and a willingness to risk and a passion to sacrifice. It should inspire us to venture out into the deep.

The Church of Scotland is facing very rough and stormy waters at the present time – I hope, with me, you won't be afraid to get your feet wet in the months ahead, brave souls venturing to go all out for God in Prestwick: St Nicholas!

The Revd Fraser R Aitken, Locum Minister.