

Presentation to Seafarers Welfare Board, April 2nd. 2008

One of the privileges of seafarer centre chaplains and ship visitors is the standing invitation to visit the many ships that enter our ports. This often includes an invitation to share a meal – a meal reflecting the multiple cultures of seafarers.

While we cannot always identify the fare before us it is invariably delicious, superbly presented and generously proportioned. It may be the second or third invitation but it is hardly good manners to say “No Thanks I’ve already had a Russian lunch and a Chinese lunch and I can’t take a Pilipino one as well!” The only hospitality cloud is the absence on board of a decent coffee machine!

On Christmas Day I visited a somewhat lonely captain of a ship whose mostly Chinese crew were off celebrating a Christmas meal. He kindly made me a mug of coffee with three teaspoons of instant plus the same of sugar. While I don’t like instant coffee and can’t bear sugar it seemed kind of un-seasonal to turn it down.

This gracious and generous hospitality is at the heart of ministry to seafarers.

I think it important for us to be aware that we are first *receivers* of grace and hospitality through the multiple sea focused organizations we belong to or are linked with. We are receivers of friendship and partnership among those with whom we work. We are affirmed in our ministry by those seafarers who bring our centres to life and who utilize our services. It is therefore our privilege ever to be providers of the services of hospitality and advocacy, friendship and care on behalf of our partner churches and seafarer organisations.

My seafaring experience amounts to the exotic wonders of inter-island travel on such historic ships as the Rangitira, the Wahine, and the railways ro-ros Aromoana and Aranui. A confiscated Korean fishing boat, renamed the Loto Ha’angana – at somewhat less than survey standard - conveyed me from Vava’u in Tonga to Nuku’alofa. As the crates of animals were loaded on board among us an experienced passenger offered this sage advice – “Stay upwind of the sea-sick pigs!” I made a cynical remark to the woman beside me after a prayer had been offered for the safety of our journey. She put me in my place with devastating logic – “Sir! This ship has never sunk!”

These few nautical journeys were supplemented by three days on a 12 metre yacht – enough overall to offer a tantalizing taste of the hypnotic appeal of the sea and ships.

I can only testify to a sense of wonder beyond words – to stare in every direction and see only the ocean everywhere – To feel the interaction of wind and wave and sky, the intensity of sunset or moonrise, of starlight and pitch darkness uncluttered by the imposition of civilization – and to be aware that only a few fractions of an inch of steel keeps one from Davy Jones locker!

In the biblical Book of Acts St. Luke’s account of Paul’s shipwreck at sea captures the terror of the out of control circumstances all who have known the sea’s fury will recognize. We see also the critical importance of clear and competent leadership with the moral integrity that won the trust of the seafarers on board that Mediterranean ship so long ago.

Some of you have spent half or more of your lives at sea. You know its wonders and terrors from first-hand direct encounter.

Our fascination with water seems to fulfill a primeval need. We began our embryonic life in water and continue embrace the aquatic wonders. For the port authorities, rescue services, fishing fleets, ferry, freight and passenger ship crews, shipbuilding and maintenance industries the sea is both a love and a livelihood. Our naval services find the sea both a protective border and a potentially adversarial highway to be patrolled.

Our own ecumenical international partnership as seafarer centres with all who are linked with sea-going services may seem a small and relatively innocuous one in the midst of a vast collection of multi-million dollar nautical empires yet we have our place and we need to stand firmly for it.

There appears also to be an assumption that seafarers will be a bunch of drunken brawling troublemakers only slightly short of a riot at any time. Perhaps it appeared so in earlier times when most seafarers were from the British Isles, were in port for up to three weeks, didn't have enough to do and were a kind of ever-changing Barmy Army. I trust it was a false image then and it is certainly so now – exceptions not withstanding.

We often find that our ministry falls below the radar of the vast majority of the community who simply don't think of the people who staff the shipping and related industries yet without these unsung heroes the world could not function. I wonder if that isn't also the case among many in the seafaring industry. We don't often get invited to shipping agents or port authority functions and I think are generally not perceived as being of significance in the industry.

Yet if there were no seafarers centres, no safe places to go ashore, no seafarer hospitality offered, seafarers would be largely at the tender mercies of pubs and brothels who no doubt meet a need but at quite a price (or so I am told). If we were not available to seafarers in port a lot more work would be created for other ship related industries and the mental health and welfare of seafarers would be at risk without the social interaction, safe haven and services we provide.

We do of course work as a team with seafarer unions, the maritime safety services, shipping agents and port authorities to ensure a satisfactory outcome where a problem is brought to our attention. It is important I think to seek to strengthen those somewhat tenuous relationships. The advance of technology in ship-building, navigation and weather forecasting has vastly improved safety at sea although we still receive seafarers whose Tasman crossing was so rough that sleep was virtually impossible and bruises from a ship's multiple steel structures were evident upon them.

Piracy remains a danger and ships still sink

Our centre in Auckland combines three societies that provide hospitality to seafarers as an effective demonstration of ecumenical Christian partnership. The Catholic Apostleship of the Sea, the Protestant International Sailors Society and the Anglican Mission to Seafarers work as a team to offer nurture, care, hospitality, telephone, transport and recreational services from our base at 114 Quay Street, and in various combinations at other ports, world-wide.

Thousands of volunteers work with port chaplains and other staff to ensure that the facilities are open day and night throughout the year.

To give a window into the outreach to seafarers I will read you some headlines from various maritime newspapers.

Wages still outstanding a year after ship went down.

Seventy seafarers from five nationalities stranded in Solomons

Seafarers delighted with their new centre at Marsden point.

Incidents of fatigue caused by long hours on watch hidden by false reporting

Continuing crackdown on pirates off Somalia

Happy ending for crew detained in Cyprus for 10 weeks due to poor state of ship.

Concerns continue over lifeboat drill safety. (More people are killed and injured in lifeboat drills than are saved by their use.)

New generation container carriers more than twice the size of existing ships yet need only half the crew numbers.

On-board swimming pools make significant contribution to merchant crew mental and physical health.

Volunteers thanked for vital care of seafarers.

Seafarer Centres world-wide provide vital onshore home for crew

If we were to remove from among us all the goods and services that did not arrive by sea most buildings would collapse, all our vehicles would vanish, industry would cease to exist and we would all be naked at least until we could sew some fig leaves – or as Kiwis flax leaves - together. Even then we would have problems as both needle and thread arrive by ship. So we celebrate all who live, work or play on the sea, we remember their hardships and dangers, their loves and their challenges.

We praise God for the faith we share together among a highly diverse community.

Animists, Communists, Atheists, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant Christians meeting as at least thirty nationalities at our Seafarers' Centres. Chaplains and volunteers are always treated with respect.

Our chapels serve as sacred spaces for everyone.

We share together the honour of being God's family united by God's grace and empowered by God's love.

In a world where volunteer service is increasingly difficult to find we are in competition with many churches and organizations that also need people to give their time and energy to worthwhile ventures. We are seeking people who are comfortable working in a multi-lingual, many-culture, various-religion situation: people happy to be frenetically busy on one duty and comparatively lightly the next; who are competent using a till and handling foreign currency

I have been wrestling with the underlying foundation for those factors that we as a Christian community of seafarer centres have to offer those who come to us.

Doctrines are very easily divisive so I have sought to understand our faith in terms of the nature and being of God –and of course in so doing have introduced a potential for division. yet I think the risk is worth it. Like all understandings it is a work in progress and always will be.

An invitation to wonder on the nature and action of God. by John Marcon

We Affirm:

God is - the eternal One
God births the universe with life in all its forms
God creates all people, equally, in the divine image
God loves every person ever born, totally, unconditionally, eternally
God empowers all humanity to be free
God provides all that is needed to enhance life for all
God continues to love us when our choices reject love
God judges every hindrance to love
God gifts transformational grace, through Jesus Christ, to all humanity
God promises to be with us always whatever happens to us
God imparts peace beyond our comprehension
God invites our response in love for God, love for others, love for ourselves
God builds community with us bringing justice and mercy, love and grace to all people
God delights to celebrate life
God affirms our belonging in the family of God
God inspires us to envision beyond perception

We declare:

God never desires the death of anyone,
 never takes revenge,
 never discriminates against any person,
 never harbours a grudge,
 never acts violently against any person,
God never refuses mercy,
 never remembers what is forgiven,
 never justifies evil,
 never withholds love,
 never causes suffering,
 never condemns any person,
 never abandons anyone
 never forces anyone to accept the gifts of life.

In conclusion our passion for the various Christian missions to seafarers builds on work begun in the modern era at least a century and a half ago. Those who swung up the rope boarding ladders to minister to crew languishing in the Bristol Channel or at other ports world-wide probably didn't imagine us swaying up gangways to points around half way up a 14 deck ship, then taking the elevator to the crew quarters. They couldn't have envisaged the giant container ship Atlanta over 1000 feet long – longer in fact than the Eiffel tower is tall – taking its 9000 TEU cargo from Asia to the United States and back in 42 days.

They couldn't be expected to suppose that the tanker Knock Nevis would be 1500ft long and displace 564000 tonnes or that a ships engine could produce 109000 horsepower from its 2300 tonne weight and 90 ft. length. They couldn't know about computerisation and GPS and a whole raft of other inventions and developments that are fundamental to our world.

Yet our ministry is essentially the same as theirs - to bring the love of God and the grace of Christian hospitality without prejudice to every seafarer even if the average ship access gangway still seems as precarious as ever.

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