

Make room at your table

A sermon preached by Revd Andrew Wright, Secretary General, Mission to Seafarers, on Sea Sunday 1 Sept 2019 at St Peter's Wolvercote

Refs: Ecclesiasticus 10.12-18; Hebrews 13, 1-8;15,16; Luke 14.1,7-14

Peterhead is the UK's biggest fishing port. In my last job, working with UK deep sea fishermen, I spent a great deal of time there. It can be a dour place. Indeed I think one famous story told of Peterhead, true I am assured, rather reflects this. It tells of a woman whose husband, Peter Reid, died. Mrs Reid wanted to place a death notice in the local paper. Like many in the town she was a tells-it-as-she-sees-it sort of a person and she just asked them to have the following line. "Peter Reid from Peterhead is dead". The man from the paper told her that for the same money she could add more words. So the following Friday there it was in the paper. "Peter Reid from Peterhead is dead. Volvo for sale!" When it comes to Christianity, Peterhead has been quite heavily impacted by some extreme Christian fundamentalist movements, amongst them the exclusive brethren. The exclusive brethren believe that members of their group should not sit down and eat at table with non members - holiness should not be tainted. This was practically very difficult for fishing crews who always take their meals together - and the shared meal at the end of the day after a long day's fishing is a profound moment as I discovered when I spent a week on a Scottish trawler. I can tell you that sitting together eating freshly caught halibut out at sea as the sun goes on after a hard day's fishing and gutting, fried with lashings of butter and boiled potatoes is unbeatable! Anyway, tables.....One skipper from the exclusive brethren fished together with his son as part of the crew along with others, all non members. He solved the table problem by cutting the one in the mess in half, dividing it in two. He ate alone at one, the others together at the other. Not perhaps quite what the gospels have in mind when they speak about table fellowship.

Jesus is not in the business of cutting tables in half. Table fellowship was so important in the gospels. There are ten incidents in Luke alone. Sitting at the meal table with people was a sign of acceptance, of fellowship, of collegiality. Jesus sat with so many different people, many in defiance of the normally accepted purity conventions. He ate with tax collectors and sinners we are told, shockingly for many. And table fellowship is taken up as an image in many of his stories and parables, not least emphasising the radical, and for some uncomfortable, extent of the embrace of God's love and forgiveness and welcome. Today's gospel story, set during a meal, takes up these themes and has a special twist aimed at pricking the pomposity, complacent assumptions and status-consciousness of those at table with him. Never assume, he says, in a theme deep in Luke's DNA, that you have a guaranteed seat at the table in preference to others. Always leave the best seats for others. When you read the gospels carefully it is quite clear that if we looked at God's kingdom as he sees it, it probably looks rather different from the way in which many Christians might imagine it! I have been often taken aback in my journeys to many different parts of the world by the status consciousness, and self-complacency of rather too many Christians. One Bishop told me that he had a policy of never attending any function unless he was either presiding or the guest of honour. Clearly he may not have read Luke 14!

Today, as we celebrate Sea Sunday I would ask you to make room at your metaphorical table, in this properly inclusive church, for a wonderful group of people who often find themselves, along with so many millions of other migrant workers, out on the margins. These migrant communities take many forms but the sacrifices they make in order to benefit those they love, and indeed in service to others, are profound beyond words, and the personal costs often unthinkable, and sometimes very cruel. Amongst those migrant communities, today I am talking specifically of course about the 1.5 million seafarers on commercial ships, and the many millions more working at sea in other capacities, especially fishermen. We are utterly dependent on these men and women, who are responsible for the transport of around 90% of all that we consume, of all that sustains our lives and makes us comfortable – and yet they have gone out of the public imagination and are almost always forgotten. They certainly deserve to be given a place of honour at the table. Away from home for up to 12 months, often more (I met one man in Cape Town who had been effectively enslaved on his fishing vessel for almost five years), seafarers have no access to the normal family and friend support networks which we take for granted. They face the very specific challenges of life at sea, including all the physical dangers which come from working in a maritime environment, climbing steep ladders to steel decks amidst dangerous machinery and potentially unstable cargos while a ship is pitching and rolling. Earlier this

year I was actually standing just 20 metres from an incident on a car carrying vessel when part of a fork lift track collapsed, leaving two Korean seafarers prone on the ground. Thankfully, they suffered nothing too serious but it was a stark reminder of what can and often does happen – and with no access to emergency services! Ships have smaller crews now and less time in ports. Isolation and loneliness are very real for many, especially in multi-national crews – and mental health is a big issue (and the number of suicides growing). In addition, we still see in many parts of the world serious issues of abuse, of exploitation, of bullying. At the Mission to Seafarers we still see cases of seafarers abandoned on their vessels by bankrupt owners, sometimes without food and water – and I gave you that figure last year of one country alone, where in one year our team dealt with 1539 seafarers who had not been paid for a combined total of 529 years! That story continues.

Those invited to share at table in the gospels were given the very best in hospitality, through the warmth of welcome, the quality of the feast and through a plethora of hospitality rituals, foot washing amongst them. This theme of hospitality is taken up in our reading from Hebrews, which urges a profound hospitality to strangers, reminding readers, well-schooled as they would have been in the Old Testament, that through such generosity some have entertained angels unawares.

The Mission to Seafarers is your Mission, one of the ten formally recognised mission agencies of the Church of England and supported so sacrificially and generously by many in this church, including the woolly hat knitters. It seeks, and I quote, “to share God's love and grace with all seafarers and their families by caring for them inclusively and holistically in the often-challenging circumstances of their lives.” It is a Mission of hospitality. It seeks to offer a generosity of welcome in all 200 ports across the world where it has a presence, as well as through its various wider projects, especially its family support networks and its international advocacy, working closely within and across a number of major maritime organisations. Its hospitality “rituals” include the provision of over 120 centres in ports across the world. These offer a warm welcome in a safe environment away from the ship, high quality wifi to enable seafarers to contact their family and friends, the chance to meet new people, to make contact with a local community, perhaps to share a problem, to purchase basic provisions and a place to be quiet for prayer, reflection or worship. Our ship visiting teams proactively and routinely visit on board. We offer transport services and our teams are fully trained to offer crisis intervention, mental health first aid and advocacy. We visit hospitals and prisons. The maritime industry is changing fast and we are determined to be where the need is greatest.

That passage from Hebrews that urges Christians to show the best in hospitality, especially to strangers, also gives a whole series of other bits of advice for practical Christian living. Amongst them is that exhortation to remember those in prison “as if you were together with them”- “and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering”. The writer probably has in mind particularly those who may be suffering or in prison because of their faith. However, the wider spirit of the New Testament surely suggests the fact that the table fellowship which we offer and which we should live in our daily lives should also include those in prison.

Prison touches our work with seafarers for two reasons, and I have been reflecting on this in recent weeks. Firstly, we deal with a good number of seafarers who find themselves locked up for years and years, often for reasons way beyond their control – sometimes as a result of arrest and sometimes as a result of piracy. One recent case, which you may remember because it reached the news here on a number of occasions, involved the 35 crew of the Seaman Guard Ohio. This an anti-piracy vessel, dedicated to keeping ships safe in the midst of the piracy crisis, was arrested by Indian authorities. The crew, Ukrainians, Estonians, Indians and six from the UK, were accused of not having the right licences for their weapons they were carrying. Clearly, the technicalities of the licences was way beyond the responsibility of most of the crew. The American owners walked away and did absolutely nothing. All 35 were put in prison for almost five years, most in grim conditions in a country deeply remote from family and friends, before the courts finally overturned a guilty verdict. It was a desperate time for them all and we were pleased to stand alongside them, to visit them and their families, offering practical support and helping with advocacy. It is right that we should, as the Hebrews passage reminds us, stand alongside and indeed “in the shoes” of such as these.

The second reason I have reflected on prison is because of some of the parallels I see between ships and prisons. Of course, there are many differences and there is a great deal of adventure and fulfilment to be found in seafaring at its best. However, there are similarities. I once spent two weeks as an inmate in prison, a deeply transformative experience. Before you get too worried, I was a theological student at the time and volunteered to do this – but I was incarcerated, put in prison kit and lived the full life of a prisoner. Even for that two weeks I felt acutely that inability to make any decisions about your life, to influence others, to communicate with family and friends. I was privy to the profound feeling of powerlessness that drives prisoners crazy. In this there are many, many parallels for seafarers. I just make one point. One thing that is happening now is that wifi is more and more available on ships. Where this is the case, and it is often expensive, of course it is great in so many ways that crew are enabled to “phone home”. However, we have heard and witnessed many cases where seafarers receive bad news from home when they are powerless to respond and with no pastoral and practical help on hand. Sometimes they have a row with their partner over social media or are given information in an unhelpful way, leaving them deeply stressed, with subsequent knock on safety issues for the ship. In response the Mission has just launched its WeCare programme, an intensely practical course, initially being rolled out in the Philipinnes, focused on educating seafarers and families on the safe and effective use of the internet and of social media. We hope this will help in some small way those who are effectively trapped at sea over long, long periods of contract. It is just one of the very practical ways in which we, in your name, seek to bring God’s love in intensely practical ways where the need is greatest. In doing so surely we are helping build God’s Kingdom.

So thanks again for your support. Thanks for welcoming seafarers and their families and offering them table fellowship. As that passage in Hebrews concludes – “Do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.”

Amen