

Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> July 2024 Sea Sunday Evensong  
2 Samuel 6:20-23; Psalm 85; Ephesians 1:15-23

**‘The Sea and Seafarers’**  
**by**  
**The Rev’d Dr. Susan F. Straub**

This second Sunday in July, we traditionally celebrate ‘Sea Sunday’. Living on the only island continent, the sea is for us a border defining the territory of the mainland of Australia, our State of Tasmania, and many small coastal islands. Not for us land or river borders with a potential for threat and existential danger should a neighbouring nation become territorially aggressive.

God gives to us time to live with the sea and its creatures, and these are sources of joy, well-being, and wholesomeness. The sea is also an unlimited inspiration for art, science, and recreation. We love it and fear it. We are in awe of its beauty and powers. Yet, in our ignorance, we have abused it and its inhabitants, our fellow creatures. Today, our knowledge, understanding and wonder grow ever greater.

In this evensong worship, we give thanks to God for the sea and for seafarers who work to defend us, rescue us, or to exchange goods with other lands. The life of a seafarer is not always easy or safe. Sea Sunday is an opportunity to acknowledge seafarers, their work, their families, and all who care about them.

With this last in mind, we also give thanks to God this evening for the special ministry of the world-wide Mission to Seafarers. What was the inspiration for this ministry?

**2 Samuel 6: 20-23**

Historically, not all seafarers were men of refined taste and deportment! Though a few were and no doubt would have appealed to Michal, the daughter of the former king, Saul, and wife of King David of Judah. Most seafarers were more like the ‘vulgar fellows’ to whom Michal likened David when she saw him leaping and dancing with his men as the ark of the covenant entered his city. The ephod he wore consisted of two pieces of linen, a back and front reaching to just below the knees, held together by straps at the shoulders and a band around the waist. As he leapt and danced with all his might (6:14) in thanksgiving to God, David unselfconsciously displayed the sides of his legs. From the story of the prophet Samuel choosing to anoint him as king and not his older and bigger brothers, sons of

Jesse, after Saul, David knew that God looked at the heart not the outward appearance. The thanksgiving and worship of a king or a ‘vulgar fellow’ were alike worthy in God’s sight. This was the kind of wisdom and revelation that the writer of the quintessential Pauline letter to the Ephesians seems to have desired for them, and us, his later readers. So incrementally, the eyes of human hearts would become enlightened, and we would know what is the hope to which God calls us.

**Mission and Seafarers**

Paul himself knew the power of faith with hope. As a prisoner on a ship bound for Rome (Acts 27), a winter storm raged for fourteen days. The ship was off the coast of Crete, but the crew and Paul were finally cast ashore, starving and exhausted, on the Island of Malta, nearly 1,000 Kms. off course. Ships of today are a far cry from those of 2,000 years ago, powered only by the renewable but inconsistent wind. The sailing ships which brought early European explorers and early settlers to Australia were bigger and more sophisticated but still reliant on wind. It took months to reach South Australia from Portsmouth or Bristol.

The crews aboard the huge naval and cargo ships, supertankers, and cruise ships that course the sea today will also be away from home for months at a time. While our defence force personnel are Australian, crews for merchant ships may have been recruited from a number of countries but the majority are from the Philippines. Seafarers must study, train, and maintain physical fitness for their qualifications and demanding work. They also have homes and families. When things happen at home, they cannot leave the ship on which they are contracted to serve. Of course, satellite and other technology has improved communication but can be a mixed blessing. Seafarers cannot do for spouses, children, parents, and friends those loving things which require their physical presence. They cannot be at a child’s birthday party, at events celebrating academic or sporting achievements, visit friends or aging parents. This ‘missing in action’, as it were, takes an emotional toll with which the seafarer and family must somehow cope. In addition, after months at sea, isolated, port calls may be just for a few hours, such is the speed of unloading and re-loading these days.

The Mission to Seafarers was initiated in 1835, when a little girl was walking by the sea with her father. He was an Anglican priest, a vicar, called John Ashley. As they looked out to sea, they saw ships anchored in the Bristol Channel waiting for the right wind to set sail to far-off places. The child asked one of those questions that it’s sometimes hard to answer. “Daddy, how do the people on those ships go to church?”

“I don’t know,” he replied, “But I’ll find out.” A couple of days later, John Ashley hired a boat to go out to one of the ships. As he approached, the crew called down to him and invited him on board. He climbed the rope ladder and was made very welcome. He asked the seafarers if they ever went to church. “No,” the seafarers replied. “We can’t easily get ashore and no one from the Church ever comes to visit us.”

That evening John Ashley thought about the seafarers and decided to start visiting the ships and offering services on board. His work was appreciated and inspired others to do the same in other places. In 1856, The Mission to Seamen was formed. Through the ensuing 185 years, the Mission became the Mission to Seafarers, reflecting social change, and has cared for seafarers in many ways.

Missions are located in more than 200 ports world-wide and mainly staffed by volunteers. A mission is primarily a place for seafarers to enjoy local hospitality, friendly help and conversation, maybe a game of table tennis, and donated books which they may read in an easy chair or take back on board.

However, the bankruptcy of shipping companies sharply increased in the last year, particularly small companies which struggle with rising fuel and other costs, coupled with necessarily longer voyages to avoid attacks by pirates or, as in the Red Sea, by Yeman’s Houthi rebels. Crews may be left stranded without their wages and other resources to enable their travel home. Mission chaplains can be a vital channel of communication for them, help them get the kind of practical support they need, and so give them realistic hope. Seafarers may be under the radar for us most of the time, but 90% of goods in our shops and other outlets are reliant on their work, while vital sea lanes and our borders are under the watchful eyes of our effective Royal Australian Navy.

Let us pray, then, with thankful hearts for seafarers, and all who work for their safety and welfare, particularly our Mission to Seafarers.

Almighty God, Lord of the sea, you have called  
naval seafarers for the defence and security of our nation,  
and merchant seafarers to bring us the necessities of life.  
When they face hazard or danger,  
when they miss their families and feel anxious about them,  
grant them the knowledge of your love and care,  
and the strength, encouragement, and hope of your peace,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**