

Address to NAMMAC 2007, Buffalo USA

How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven...

These are Jacob's words after spending an uncomfortable night on the desert floor, his head on a stone, and waking up with the even more uncomfortable realization that he had spent the night in the presence of Almighty God himself! Disturbing thought that, considering where Jacob was coming from.

And here I am today, waking to the realization that God is here among you too. How awesome is this place. I do not say this lightly. I refer not to a new experience. My moment of recognition of God's real presence here dates back to 2004. I was in New Orleans at the ICMA World Conference.

I was a minister to seafarers back then, in the Port of Durban, or eThekweni as South Africans have now taken to calling the place of my birth. I was as committed a port chaplain then as ever I have been, and as staunchly Protestant as I had been taught. It had by then only just begun to dawn on me that I was getting up close and personal with God in places where, surely, he ought not to have been hanging out. Well, certainly not on ships! Were those ships not crewed by Philippinoes, then, in my experience, there was little evidence of God being on board at all. But, the Lord humoured me. He went there whenever I went. He climbed the gangways with me, negotiated the maze of alleyways, respectfully peeped into the always-too-busy-to-be-disturbed-master's office, poked his nose into the galley and broke bread with us in the mess room, and then shared a few pleasantries with the folk who were not too preoccupied to say hi, and as a parting shot invited all to the centre. And sometimes, much, much too rarely, he would join in a discussion on matters spiritual.

Those were frightening ship visits, I may tell you. Those visits had me sitting quayside in my Volkswagen praying desperately that the burden of taking God on board would today be lighter than yesterday's. But those visits were hardly ever easy. I almost always came away thinking that I hadn't done enough, that I should have achieved more, that I had failed to display the likeness of Jesus Christ, and failed even more dismally to deliver him to them. I often felt that I had failed to bear the burden of God.

So, to New Orleans, USA, 2004. A workshop is presented on the spirituality of port chaplains, and I attend. It is led by a Roman Catholic priest, I discover, who challenges me to describe my own spirituality in two single words. I'm stumped. I come away from the small group discussion dismayed at my lack of insight into my daily relationship with God. Back in the workshop, I wake up to find my own head to have been as stony as Jacob's pillow, and a gangway to God staring me in the face.

What do you know: I discover that God is already there, up there on the ship, even before I arrive, because that's where this gangway goes: to a place where God lives! It is not I who am to take God up there and to enthrall seafarers to sit up and take note. It is I who needs to take notice of God already sailing with and working at these men who may, just as I, not know it yet that he is there, but he is nonetheless. God awaits me there.

Humility and *exhilaration*: those I think were the two words which most aptly described the spirituality that I came to take home with me to Africa. To stand in humble awe of the God who went ahead of me, and to bristle with excitement at the thought of meeting him on board and seeing him at work with the people there whom he already loves enough to have given his Son.

So today, I do not doubt, that the God who goes before us, arrived here long before I did. Nor do I awake surprised to find the people of God gathered here in Buffalo as Jacob once found the angels in Bethel. I have come to expect that God lives in this world, that this is his world. I have come to realize that God will be wherever there is someone about whom he loves. And God lives and loves on ships. I know this. I have learnt from faith and experience to expect this. I am neither shocked nor frightened by it. But I am ceaselessly in awe.

How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God. Thanks be to God for you all, and thank you that I may share this time with you here in Buffalo.

These thoughts on *life in God's world* bring to mind the second of the two key elements in understanding our ministry to people of the sea: that ours is a *life-space ministry*.

To the Jews, the apostle Paul had said, I become like a Jew. To the Greeks, I become like a Greek.

The apostle Paul understood that to reach seafarers, we need to enter into their world. That to get ourselves as close to the lives of seafarers as possible, we need to find ways to share in their experience: we need to get to know their likes and dislikes; to see with our own eyes their dreams and expectations; we need to feel with our own hearts the fears that frighten them, and the excitement that enthuses them, and the difficulties that beset and frustrate them; we need to understand their physical and material needs, the want of money that drives them to sea and the need to maintain a decent standard of living for their families, and the price that they will pay to get it. We need also to appreciate their love of the sea, their passion for mighty machinery and their striving to excel in their careers. We need to get behind what makes them tick, what makes them laugh, what gives them

goose bumps and what makes them cry into their pillows at night. We have got to understand their cultural isolation, their loneliness and their longing for intimacy. And if we have not understood the dehumanizing effects of living in one's workspace, of being cut off from one's own property and being deprived of one's privacy, and being at a loss for anything even remotely holy, we have not even begun to comprehend how their world works.

And yet, the Christian ministry to seafarers is deceptively easy. One sees very little of these things on the friendly faces that greet one at the top of gangways. A quick chat about the trip here and the voyage to come, a courteous remembrance of family ties and the delivery of an internet-sourced newspaper, a brochure of the local seafarers' mission and a piece of Scripture, seem to be all we can do in the short space of time. Sometimes an earthquake at home makes for a good conversation piece, if nothing else. If we had gained access to the port and to the ship without being turned away, we consider ourselves lucky. And if we had had the good fortune to have been invited to take a soft drink with the Master, or a just-baked roll in the galley, and could share teatime with a few off-watch ratings, we are elated at the success of our efforts. One could easily convince oneself that that is it, and that we should not expect more of a ship visit, superficial as it may be, only rarely to get into the deep water of the soul. So, the ministry to seafarers becomes an easy enterprise, often over and done with by lunchtime. Tonight we'd pop into the centre and have a beer with the guys...

A colleague of ours once referred to seafarers' ministry as the Rolls Royce of mission. You don't even have to leave your home town to go to Matthew 28's ends of the earth. You just take a drive down to the port after breakfast. The ends of the earth will come to you. By nightfall, you're back in the easy chair watching sitcoms and tolerating the nagging wife. "Heaven!" he says, this ministry is sheer heaven."

I think that to get to know seafarers, we need not only to climb gangways, but also to get ourselves wet, in a manner of speaking. We have to dive into their world, we need to swim in their sea. We should immerse ourselves in the world of seafarers.

One of the first mistakes we tend to make is to call the mission to seafarers an *industrial ministry*. Well, it is that, isn't it? We do go to work in their workspace. But to call it an industrial ministry may lead us to forget that this is also their **life-space**. The powerful grip of the workplace on the entire life of seafarers cannot be overestimated. This mobile and artificial structure of the ship becomes more than merely their workspace. It defines their world. It determines their being. This ship determines who they are, what they do and, ultimately also what they are worth. I am afraid that to call this an industrial ministry, will only contribute to the injustice already done to seafarers when people value them only for their uses in making a profit.

The ministry to seafarers should, I believe, be much more than onboard air conditioning or a lifejacket. It is, or should be, a ministry encompassing all the life experiences of men and women who happen to live at sea. Hence my feeling that we should immerse ourselves in their world as one would wade into the waves at the beach. To the Jews, become as a Jew. To the Greeks, become as a Greek. To the Philippino's, then, become Philippino, and just so: be Chinese to the Chinese, and Bulgarian to the Bulgarians... And if you thought that that was easy to do, you are deceived. Standing at the bottom of the accommodation ladder in the Durban Chemical Terminal, you should consider that in fewer than 30 tiny steps for man, you will be making one giant leap to Romania. Or, by the time you get to the top, it may turn out that you'll have to be Burmese.

Sadly, we are human, neither angels nor chameleons. Getting to the deck of that ship, I have to use my South African permit, this Caucasian body, and my stilted second-language English. I am still me. But when I hear Paul saying that *I* should become Jewish, if you happen to be Jewish, or Greek, if that's who you are, I am unsettled. I realize that none of the things that I have brought with me to ship in my bag or in my car's boot, all the things upon which I have so heavily relied to open up this ship to my ministry - not the newspapers, nor the video's, nor the books, and, no, not even the Bible! - will do the trick. None of these things can mutate to become Jewish or Greek, or Russian, or Norwegian, by the time I've climbed those steps. It is *I* upon whom everything depends. It is *I* who should adapt to the environment of the others. I am my own and only tool to get the job of this outreach done. I am the instrument that I can tune to what God requires when I set foot on that deck. I am the crucial element in this connection between men and God. Oh, of course none of this happens without God's Holy Spirit, but having said that, I pray that you will not now feel that you've been let off the hook to really make the effort yourself. So, what Paul says I ought to do to connect with God's people, makes me feel desperately inadequate each time I approach a new ship.

So, we must get ourselves into a seafarer's world, we should get into, and under, his skin, really, we should become his kind, his kin, and to use again my metaphor of immerse ourselves in their world, we should go swimming in their sea.

You might be thinking this is stretching it a bit. Yes, I probably am taking Paul's own metaphor too far. At the same, time I think it is true that we have to adapt to others; that we have to apply ourselves to their world, one that is rather different from our own. This ministry has us venturing into what is for us the dangerous and uncharted territory of another's life. To survive there, we need to find out the lay of their land, in a sense; to gauge their tides, to beware of the undercurrents, the submerged reefs and icebergs, and to take supreme care of the delicately balanced ecosystem of that life. If we are to be of any use to anyone, we will have to learn to

swim in their pool.

The fact is, it is we who have to go into other people's life-spaces, it is we who become the Jews and the Greeks that they already are, and not the other way around. Mission has all too often been understood as confronting others in ways that expected of *them* to change and for *them* to become more like *us*. However, it is Biblical, but almost unthinkable, isn't it, that in mission and ministry it is crucial that we should first become more like the ones we had once intended to threaten into becoming copies of ourselves.

So, in what sense then are we to become Jewish or Greek? Paul means, I think, to drive home to us that we are involving ourselves with people who are fully human, not simply labourers, nor the product nor the victims of their labour. Seafarers are *people* who work on ships at sea. They have lives too, you know? And we should connect with them on as many levels of their lives as possible. Oh, we would of course never make the mistake of reducing them to mere objects of labour, you might say. That's the kind of inhumane treatment one expects of ship owners and manning agents. No, we like to say that we have a wider vision, a more humane approach. We like to compliment ourselves as looking holistically at the whole human being, don't we? Yes, of course, because we are chaplains, and we know better. We would never treat seafarers as being anything less than fully and completely human! Or would we? Well, God has seen fit to warn us about ourselves. Do not be tempted, he says, to give them only a word and to believe you've done it all. To simply say: "Be warm!" without giving them a blanket. "Be warm!" we say, "be healed," "be saved", earnestly believing that this is mission, this is enough. This is *everything!* Oh yes, we do that, sometimes. On the one hand then, that would make us not much different from the world, would it now? The world likes to believe that seafarers are mere labourers, that they have a job to do and never seem to get on with it quite well enough. We could believe that seafarers are no more than mere lost souls, who simply can't get on with the business of life. But it would also be blasphemous, playing at being god who can simply say: "Let there be light!" and it happens. We are not God. We are not the Christ. We are not even the Holy Spirit. We are chaplains, and all too human at that. If we were to say: "Warm yourself!" we would have to find the blanket and supply it too. But then, that's what being human is all about, isn't it? Perhaps better said: that is what being Christian is all about.

And we Christians are human. Our world is a human environment. And one of the glorious God-given gifts of our spirited humanity is that we can connect to people. Becoming Jews or Greeks in the space of climbing the 30 steps of a gangway is possible. If the Bible says it is, I believe there is a way. I think that what the Bible means is that, being human and being Christian, chaplains understand the art of immersing ourselves in the lives and the worlds of other human beings. We can all be human. We are gifted that way. We, in particular, know how to go swimming in the

watery worlds of seafarers.

Could it be because we are good centre managers? No. I doubt it. Some centres have sadly closed down where I come from, perhaps because they were not run well enough. We do understand the need for centres, of course, but we are not always the best people to make a profit and to sustain services by finding funds. But if no-one else does it, we'll try our hand at it, won't we, because someone has to do it. And, what do you know, some of us do it rather well!

Do you think that we connect with seafarers' worlds because we are able allies in their labour disputes? I think labour- and union business are best left to the ITF-inspectors and the maritime lawyers, don't you? I know I have certainly made a regular hash of a labour dispute on at least one occasion. That does not mean we do not care for justice to seafarers. It also does not mean that we aren't passionate about our own prophetic ministry. I'm sure seafarers around your port know that they can count on you.

Are we maritime doctors? No, but we do care for seafarers health. And we will liaise with port health services and visit seafarers in hospital, won't we?

Are we trained as professional sports organizers? No, certainly not!! But we are really serious about seafarers being fit, thus having a healthy body that is home to a keen mind.

Do we offer a taxi or a shuttle service? No, not normally anyway. The one time that I did so I was nearly killed! The taxi's in Africa have taxi wars and kill one another in drive-by shootings if they find you trespassing on their routes. *(I was parked in, threatened and it came close to assault. I was angry at the time at the exploitation of the seafarer I was transporting by taxi's that demanded an exorbitant fee from a man who was left behind by his ship and had no money to pay. So, we do drive seafarers around town, don't we, and not only the destitute.)*

Are we ambassadors welcoming visitors to our countries, organizing sight-seeing tours and social gatherings? No, not me. But hospitality is a Christian virtue. So, to be honest, I have taken seafarers to game reserves because they wanted to go. I do come from Africa but I don't know my giraffes from my zebra's really, so I'm sure there were better guides to be had. Strangely, that didn't seem to bother them, somehow...

Are we ship's inspectors or surveyors? No. But the team in Durban have quietly reported to the port authority when seafarers voiced concern over structural damage and unsafe practice.

Are we agents who buy and bring supplies? Do we normally offer a postal service? Should we be sheriffs of the state to go in search of food and clothing and sponsors for clean water and electricity to be supplied to arrested and abandoned ships? Are we really social care professionals who understand the dynamics of remote family systems and are able to defuse onboard conflicts between officers and ratings?

We are none these things. And yet we are all of these things, because here in this room sit many of us who have done all of these and more. But we did them not because it was our job to be doing them. We, more often than not, did them because there was no one else to do them but ourselves, and, because we deem these things to be of service to seafarers, we have not batted an eyelid. We took it in our stride. We did them all. We did them because of who we are: we are Christians. As the need for these services arose in ports, we rose up to meet these needs and we used them as opportunities to serve. And you know what? We are really good at it sometimes, as it turns out. We have become a highly valued workforce in the service of basic needs to seafarers. I thank God for that.

We have, I think, and our track record is proof thereof, immersed ourselves in the lives of seafarers. We have noted their needs, and we have supplied those needs. I think we have done quite a bit of swimming in the seafarers' pond. We have been Jews and Greeks and a few others.

Ah, but there is also a danger lurking here. The sea is a dangerous place. And navigating someone else's world is no less dangerous to an old salt. Immersion in strange waters can lead to shipwreck, drowning, and pollution. We would do well to note that as difficult as it may be to connect with people, just as easily can we forget that we are not mere tourists in another's world. We do have a place there, and we need to understand our place, and we should take the utmost care to keep to it. There is something immensely dangerous lurking in our determination to access at all costs the lives of seafarers. Entering their world could all too easily tempt us to annex and to colonize our captive audience, leaving little freedom to God's Christ to meet them on equal terms.

I believe that what it all boils down to is this: we do all that this ministry requires of us, because this is what seafarers want and need. We have entered their world. We now need to understand the scope and limits of our sojourn there.

We do one very simple thing when entering others' lives: we minister to seafarers the Christ of God. And it's an almost incarnational thing for us: we become Christ-like in their world, loving them there with the love of God, and thus stating the case that their world, and ours, is God's world.

We are pastors.

Oh, there are many ways of being pastors: wrong ones too. I hope that I have made clear what ICMA holds to be true: that we enter another's life space guardedly, only with permission and with utmost respect, that not only the ISPS-Code keeps us out, or cautions us to move with care. We move in that strange world of another's life guided by love and only to serve. Another's life space is a sacred place. It is a place where God is already at work.

It would be a grave mistake to assume that this commission to minister the Christ is, in itself, enough reason for us to be welcomed into seafarers' lives. We may believe the benefits of the Christ to be so self-evident that our ministry will be automatically embraced, endearing us to seafarers. It isn't. Be fishers of men, our Father says.

I am not a fisherman. But my (earthly) father is a keen one. My father taught me that to catch fish you need appropriate bait.

Be fishers of men by offering them what they want and what they need. A really good fisherman dresses up both to be one and the same.

Jews and Greeks and many others, so varied are the worlds of seafarers. However small globalization has made our planet seem, people's own worlds are immeasurably huge and complex. Enter the pastor, with supreme care. Enter to serve. Minister the Christ. Be pastors, this is what God has made you. And care for the real needs of seafaring people.

Sadly, seafarers will probably forget they ever knew you. They will remember the Christ.

May you of NAMMA be blessed by the Holy Spirit of God and his Christ, as we gather in the Name of our one and Triune God. May you be humbled by his presence, and exhilarated by his welcoming of you.

