

Sermon to celebrate the 175th anniversary of the Queen Victoria Seamen's Rest: March 16th 2018.

As I sat down to prepare this sermon, I had before me the lavish document that narrated the history of the Queen Victoria Seamen's Rest over the first 150 years of its existence. It was mightily impressive. But what about the 25 extra years that have unfolded since 1993? Alexander Campbell [The QVSR CEO] sent me a fascinating document that filled that gap. He ended it with a quotation from the Old Testament, words written for tough, dark times. It's the prophet Jeremiah who speaks a word of hope to his despairing people. Just listen to those words now:

“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” [Jeremiah 29: 11]

Be under no doubt, this occasion (in the spirit of that biblical verse) offers a cause for celebration. A glorious past, a relevant present, a readiness to face the challenges of the future – all these come into focus. But we must add to them the amazing capacity of this organisation to adapt to change, to defy the odds, to survive circumstances that would have (indeed have already) decimated others. The Queen Vic has an ability to re-invent itself that David Bowie would have been envious of.

So it's a time for Hip Hip Hips with matching Hoorays, it's a red-white-and-blue occasion, a time to be proud, a moment for throwing hats in the air and, why not?, asking the redoubtable Terry Simcoe [a former QVSR CEO] to do a cartwheel or two down the aisle. “Happiness, happiness; the greatest gift we can possess” – let Ken Dodd of beloved memory set the tone for today's celebration. NOT, I would insist, to deny the difficulties facing us, NOR to diminish the size of the challenges or the pain or the suffering that undoubtedly lie ahead of us, BUT, simply and from grateful hearts, to thank God for all that is past even as we buckle down to trust him for all that's to come.

I feel honoured to have been asked to be your preacher today, surrounded by Admirals and Would-be Admirals and half the company of heaven. I get asked to preach at all kinds of commemorative services and so often I have to work very hard to feel any connection with the activity we're remembering or celebrating. The annual service for the Society of Accountants comes to mind; or a sermon to lawyers and judges in one of our Inns of Court, a sermon in memory of a highly significant judgement in the field of case law. Normally, I'd

run a mile from lawyers and accountants, yet there I was giving them the benefits of my wisdom and experience as to the manner born (I just wished I could have charged them the fee they'd have charged me for the amount of time I'd spent writing their sermons!).

Today, there are no such factors in my mind. I'm here with strong credentials and a great deal of natural affection. For I'm the son of a man of the sea. My father was a merchant seaman from the time he left school. At the age of 30, in 1936, he signed up for the Royal Navy Reserve before he fully enlisted at the outbreak of war. 13 years later he returned to the merchant navy and stayed there till he retired. He began his career as an ordinary seaman, rising to the dizzy heights of Chief Petty Officer and Coxswain to the Commander of the Home Fleet. His proudest memory was of the trip aboard HMS York which sped across the Atlantic just days after the events in Pearl Harbour which brought the Americans into the war. We have photographs of him with Winston Churchill on that historic voyage. I remember him telling me stories of derring-do in various parts of the world; I don't think there was a continent he hadn't visited during his years at sea.

The reading from the Psalms (together with the verse I quoted earlier from the Book of Jeremiah) depicts a nation in crisis. The parameters the people have always worked with have been destroyed. The future looks bleak and the people are depressed. Just look at the way they respond to their difficulties. And tell me if you don't find some parallels between what the scripture describes and the way we deal with our problems today. We're told that some wandered off into what are called "desert wastes." Others sit down in self-pitying darkness and gloom, "prisoners in [their] misery." Yet others cave in to the consequences of their wrong-headed choices in some kind of post-trauma depressive disorder. But some, brave souls, defy both the limitations of their culture and the logic of the events they've undergone; they ignore all the risk assessment advice they've been given and also the fear of the unknown. Off they go, down to the sea in ships.

Throughout human history it's those who've pushed at the limits of their endurance – physical, mental and spiritual – who've taken the human project forward. Settling for a comfortable re-enactment of the way things have always been, happy only with familiar landmarks, depending constantly on the *status quo*, will never really satisfy the restless questing of the human mind. The sea, so seemingly boundless, is both a physical challenge in its own right while also offering the perfect metaphor for the courage needed to look

change in the eye, to find new ways of facing up to the difficulties ahead of us. Those who plough the seas know this as well as anyone.

Those who take to the seas know they need the strength that comes from on high. For us landlubbers we can only raise our prayer on their behalf: "O hear us as we cry to thee, for those in peril on the sea." And how many of the seafaring community can give testimony to the protecting hand of God as they've braved the heaving seas and the roaring winds? But not all of them. So many seamen pay a high price for their endeavours. My father was one. He filled his spare hours and his time ashore drinking with his mates. When he was discharged from the Royal Navy at the end of the war, his captain described him as "keen, loyal and honest, with high seamanship qualities and well above the average power of command. [He] possesses initiative and intelligence and would do well in any position of trust..." He should have added the words: "except marriage." His drinking habits brought mayhem to our home and what we'd now call domestic violence. It led to a nasty divorce, the homelessness of my mother and her two sons, and a nasty situation all round. My father's long absences from home certainly played their part in our unhappy lives.

The Queen Victoria Seamen's Rest is a refuge, a harbour from the storms of life, a place of safety. Once upon a time it just offered cubicles for short-term birds of passage but now, of course, rivalling the Hilton, it caters for longer-staying residents and with modern comforts thrown in. It offers shelter, support and hope to ex-servicemen and seafarers alike, some of whose lives are fragile and all of whose needs are so easily overlooked by statutory and charitable bodies alike. Who can fail to admire the faith of those who, in an age of austerity and recession, set out to raise millions of pounds for a complete refurbishment of the property? Or who returned sizeable amounts of Local Authority revenue income in order to meet the Charity's original objectives? Or who diversified its outreach by making contact with Tilbury and DP (Dubai Ports) World in order to be better placed to look after the welfare needs of seafarers visiting Thames-side ports? "Change and decay in all around I see," said the hymn writer. If only he'd looked at the Seamen's Rest he'd have found something to challenge that bleak way of looking at things.

Much earlier in my ministry, I used to attend Christmas parties at the Poplar Mission organised for the children of Chinese sailors and local women – another feature of maritime life. This club had been begun in the 1930s under the aegis of the QVSR, by an eminent surgeon named Harold Oatley and his

wife Winifred. They acted on the New Testament principle that if believers can't (or don't) love their neighbours whom they see, how can they possibly say they love God whom they don't see. And so they began an important piece of work. By the time I got to know them, this Anglo-Chinese group straddled three generations and we used to have great fun at those parties building Chinese walls, pulling Chinese crackers, making Chinese jokes, and eating Chinese food. At the end of the evenings, Harold and Winifred were always last off the premises. Margaret and I would help them gather up the rubbish and I'd watch dear old Harold, one of the country's leading orthopaedic surgeons, sweep the floor with a large brush. The hands that had set a thousand bones were now employed in serving the rather menial needs of the moment. And it's that picture that reminds me of all the saints who have contributed to the building, the development, the outreach, the mission, the care, the support and the hope offered by this remarkable institution. For which we can only thank God from the bottom of our hearts.

I began by quoting the concluding words of Alex Campbell's history of the last 25 years. Let me end by quoting the way that his predecessor ended the history of the previous 150 years. He did so by quoting a chorus I learned in Sunday School, a chorus that, in a context like this morning's service, ceases to be children's song. It has far richer meaning and it's as good a way of ending my remarks as I could possibly think of:

Wide, wide as the ocean,
High as the heavens above,
Deep, deep as the deepest sea
Is my Saviour's love.
I, though so unworthy,
Still am a child of his care:
For his Word teaches me
That his love reaches me
Everywhere.

God bless the Queen Victoria Seamen's Rest. And God bless us all.

Amen.