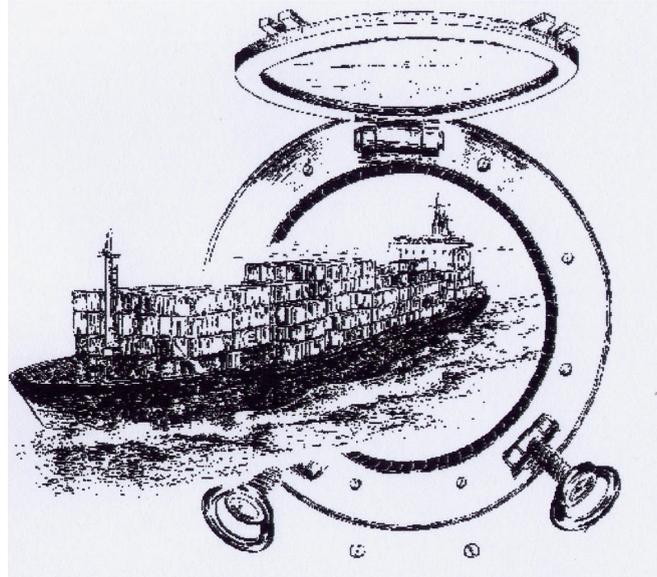


Through the Porthole

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Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers, and read it; and Hezekiah went up to the house of the Lord, and spread it before the Lord.
2 Kings 19:14

King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah, the son of Amoz, prayed and cried out to heaven.
2 Chronicles 32:20

Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent to Hezekiah, saying, Thus says the Lord God of Israel: 'That which you have prayed to Me . . . I have heard.' 2 Kings 19:20

Dear Friends

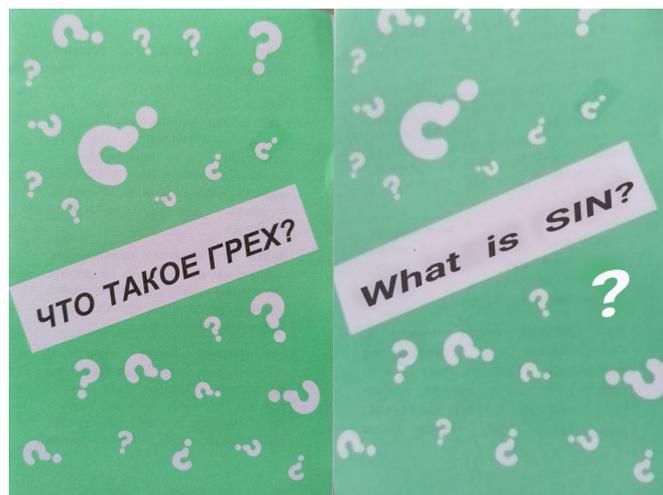
Our world is in crisis and everybody seems to be affected. Understandably I think we are all quite scared, and many are without hope! But for the believer we can do what Hezekiah did - bring the problem to the Lord. Both he, and Isaiah cried out to heaven. With the world being thrown into panic with the outbreak of the coronavirus, President Trump called his nation to prayer, and the Pope told people they could pray directly to God for forgiveness without having to go to confession. As the pandemic continues to cause widespread suffering we pray that our own Prime Minister Mr Johnson, who has himself contracted the virus, will cry out to God for His mercy and that his example will cause the nation as a whole to pray, because we have the assurance in the verse above that God will hear us when we pray.

During these difficult times of total lock down thousands of seafarers are stranded on their ships. They are not allowed to go home and not even allowed to go ashore. A fellow chaplain describes them as being like 'paid

prisoners'. Shipping companies are struggling to get their crews sent home before exhaustion and mental health issues start affecting those who are stranded in this way. This is proving difficult with countries closing their borders and stopping flights.

It has been a privilege to take the gospel of salvation to the seafarer. To challenge them to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ for all eternity and not just in times of danger or anguish of heart. As this letter goes to print, the Seamen's Christian Friend Society is looking at a way to support seafarers remotely. It is a plan in progress. They have formally stated, as a mission, that we are not to go into the ports until further notice. Meanwhile, below follows my report on recent ship visits prior to new restrictions.

Most recently was a Captain who when I met him was just about to go home and probably made it before travel restrictions were put in place. In itself there is nothing remarkable about a person going home after 3 months, except that this Captain who has had a career spanning 45 years at sea, has now reached retirement and is going back to Lithuania to enjoy his children and grandchildren. I offered him various Russian language books, but he declined them all. He was of the Orthodox faith and didn't want it - except for two small things. One was a mirror with the text John 3:16 on the back of it, and the other a small tract shown here. Wow, what a message to take home after 45 years. I hope, I pray that this man really took it home and read every word. The Saviour is waiting to offer him full and free salvation!



Another Russian Capt was 69 years old. He too had spent most of his life at sea. This man lived in Latvia. He was so friendly. It was him who laughingly mentioned how seamen believe in God when they are in danger. It was him who translated the title of the tract I had given to the man mentioned above. But he understood what sin is and gave a few examples to me. The Captain had called the Chief mate to the bridge to meet me. This man didn't say much but he had 'his own Bible' on board and nodded and agreed in the conversation. The Captain referred to the American currency - quoting, but adapting the words to 'In God We (must) Trust'. When it seemed right for me to leave the ship the Captain offered me tea. It was a polite offer but not appropriate to stay any longer. "Next time" I said (the ship was going to return to Ipswich soon) but there wasn't a 'next time' due to the port locking down.

One very wet Sunday afternoon I went to the port hoping that the rain had stopped men from going ashore. I visited a ship with 11 Ukrainians on board. All the crew were there, and after the watchman had taken me to the ship's office the watch officer informed the crew of my visit. Many did come to meet me and to my astonishment I gave out several copies of the scriptures and children's Bible story books. I cannot remember the last time Russian speaking seamen were so enthusiastic. It reminded me of the early '90s when the former USSR was opening up its borders and there was interest in the Word of God.

As most of the ships I visit have at least some Russian speaking crew I try to go prepared. To sow the seed is my aim, with the prayer that someone else will water it. I have good resources in the Russian language, although I still also offer Lithuanian and Ukrainian literature sometimes.

Following on from meeting the Ukrainians I then went to a smaller vessel owned by the Arklow Shipping Company. If it hadn't been raining, the ship would have been discharging its cargo of cement, so visiting in the rain enabled me to speak to the crew who were waiting for the rain to stop. While I chatted to the Filipino Cook the Captain appeared. "Do you remember me?" he asked cheerfully. Absolutely. This young Lithuanian had taken a Lithuanian children's Bible home for his family. The Captain pointed out that it was an old publication. Yes, maybe, but the words of the Bible never change. Our Cook here is a believer and every Sunday plays christian music in his galley, a witness to those on board. Another Filipino who witnesses amongst mixed nationalities on an Arklow vessel is a man whose Father and Uncle are both Pastors in the Philippines.

Ships gangways on smaller ships are usually short but sometimes very steep, and more of a board with rails rather than steps. This is how it was when I came onto a ship called Frisiana. The Dutch Captain from 'Sneek' in Friesland just happened to be on deck and welcomed me inside. I had met him before. The Cook busied himself around us as we talked and then I arranged to come



back at the end of the afternoon to meet his crew who had by this time returned to their work. Later on the Filipinos came and met me. We talked and there was much interest taken in the literature and scriptures. The Cook read aloud one of the tracts which prompted conversation about Salvation, and so the seed was sown.

It is usually only the younger Russian sailors who speak some English but I expect the officers who sail the ship to speak it too. So I would ask for the watch officer to be called when a ship's crew is all Russian speaking. On a ship called 'Amke' the 2nd mate came to meet me. He was from Kaliningrad. A lot of seamen come from there. He wanted to know the purpose of my visit and then I showed him the literature I was offering for 'free'. As this man was friendly and open I took advantage of it and kept him waiting while I looked up the scripture - Acts 13:30 in the Russian Bible. "But God raised Him (Jesus) from the dead". Both men looked over my shoulder as I looked it up. I wanted to know if he understood it, as it is a verse as I am going to use it on a fridge magnet we have designed to give out to sailors. With so many religions and sects confusing seafarer's minds we have this certainty that the Lord Jesus is the only one who has risen from the dead and is alive again. Shortly afterwards our young officer said he was busy and excused himself.

Last November I met a Norwegian Captain who was a Christian. He came from a tiny island of just 200 inhabitants. He and his Chief Officer were a team, and friends on and off the ship, working on the same ship all the time and rotating 4 weeks on and 4 weeks off. The rest of the crew were Polish. While I enjoyed their hospitality the crew were encouraged to come and see the literature I was offering. When they failed to appear or held back the Captain took Polish literature to offer to them later.

When I asked Polish crew where they came from, one man said that he came from Hel. Had I misunderstood? Off the coast of Gdynia in Northern Poland is a long tiny peninsula with a small town at the very end called Hel. Pronounced Hell. It is popular for water sports and leisure.

Our current world crisis is preventing all forms of leisure. Recreation and socializing outdoors is forbidden. The coronavirus has been compared to The Plague of the 14th century. But throughout it all as Christians we must never fail to trust that God is in control. He doesn't want anyone to go to Hell. Our Lord Jesus Christ is sitting at the right hand of God who had raised Him from the dead. Hezekiah spread his petitions out before the Lord. We must too.



Courtesy of google maps

In His service

Keith Oliver