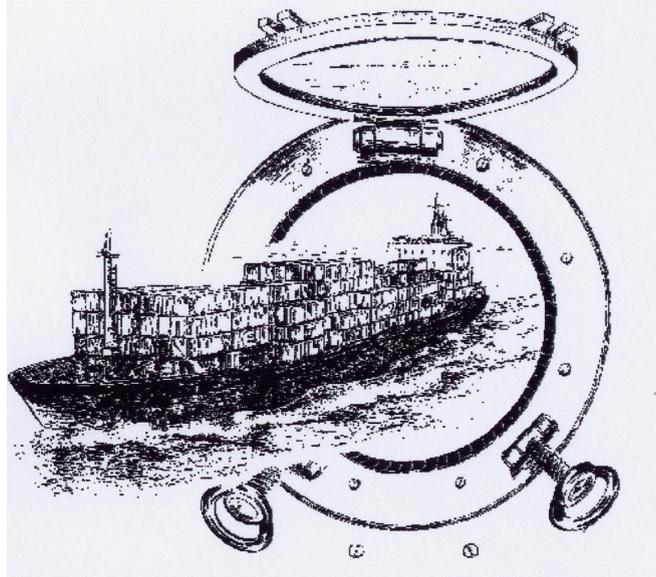


# Through the Porthole

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Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us,  
But to Your name give glory,  
Because of Your mercy,  
And because of Your truth. Psalm 115:1

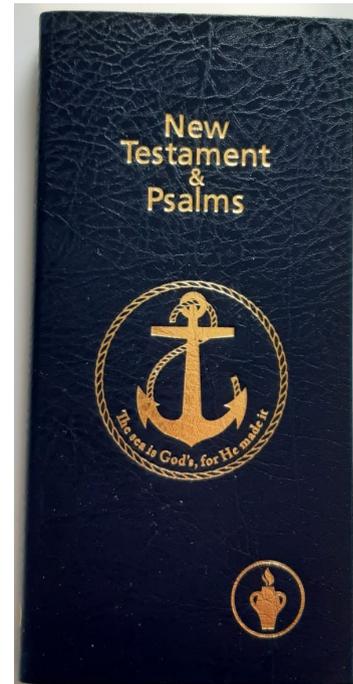
Dear friends and prayer partners

With restrictions continuing in the port because of the coronavirus pandemic I have taken up 'ship spotting' in a much bigger way. Well, not so much spotting, as 'tracking'. I fully understand that to you, the reader, ship spotting must sound very 'dull'. After all, what is exciting about the modern ships of today compared with ships of the past which had masts and sails. But if you look further, even inside - 'through the porthole' you will perhaps feel the pulse of life and hardship within.

For months huge crude oil tankers continued to drop anchor off the Southwold coast, some staying just a few days but others, weeks and even months. I later learnt that this was mirrored off the coast of Falmouth in Cornwall. After asking a company doing similar work to the one in Lowestoft to take one package to a ship that I knew about I then asked if they would be willing to do it on a regular basis. Maybe two a month. They agreed, as long as I didn't specify a particular ship. By November I was allowed to send them weekly leading up to Christmas as we had tweaked the packages to make them seasonal. By this time it was taking up all my free time as I watched the movements of these vessels. I was also going up to Lowestoft once or

twice a month to drop 'care packages' off at the home of the man who took them with him when going to the ships. I mentioned to you last July that the Gideons in Lowestoft had started supplying me with scriptures. They have also been able to get me Russian New Testaments. This has made a big difference and the enthusiasm and prayer support which comes with it is wonderful.

Towards the end of last year the government told us we should only travel if it was essential. No problem, said our man in Lowestoft you can drop the packages off at my boat in Levington which is just 15 minutes drive from Ipswich. Have you ever looked for one particular boat in a marina 'full of boats'? This HSV (high speed vessel) goes out to meet fuel tankers heading towards the river Thames. They collect samples from the ship then someone drives down from Lowestoft to take the samples to a laboratory in Essex. This exercise saves the vessel delays in off loading. So after I had located this 10 metre long boat I tried to meet the crew before making up the packages and going to Levington with them. After all, how could I just go onto a boat like this and drop my packages off. Well, I met two retired fishermen. After explaining to them how I had been given permission from their boss, they told me how it would all work and perhaps I would like them to take a package to the tankers that they were visiting too. You can drop them off anytime, because the door isn't locked. The lock is broken, they said laughing, so just put them inside. Now they text me when the next ship is coming and I get a package ready for them too, or I put one on board in case they are going. When they come back into Levington the man from Lowestoft is waiting to



accept the samples. Later on when he returns to Lowestoft he hands over my packages. On two occasions I have had to go to the marina late in the evening after work in order to get the package on board in time. No one is around, but Henriette comes with me and points out to me that the Lord has given us a full moon each time to keep us safe and make it easier.

One tanker off Southwold stayed at anchor for about 9 months, so I became determined to reach it. I made various phone calls hoping someone would help me. By November I started getting things ready for this vessel so that I could be prepared at short notice if the men in Levington were asked to visit, but then she lifted her anchor and went off to France. She is currently in the Middle East. It's my prayer that she might still come back into local waters and that I will be able to reach it with scriptures, but maybe someone else will get the opportunity instead of me!!



Up until the most recent lockdown I had access to visit ships in Ipswich. But I was requested to visit when the port was not working - evenings and week-ends. Very few ship's Captains wanted me on board, but that suited me too. Covid is talked about all the time at work so I have been very conscious of the problems affecting shipping. Few crews are allowed off their ship, and some seafarer's have to stay much longer on board because of the complications with crew changes. One or two memorable occasions stand out in the port of Ipswich. One day I was talking to a Filipino crew on MV Arlau and the cook came outside in his t-shirt (it was very cold) and asked me if I could get him some cough medicine. Alarm bells rang in my head - cough medicine? Covid! Does the Captain know you are coughing? He had been coughing for a long time and he was overweight. I bought him some cough medicine and cough sweets. I wondered if my face mask had been properly in place and was the wind blowing against me.

When I came to **MV Valentina** I bibbed my car horn as no one was around. Roman, the Russian chief mate came down onto the quay and chatted. He spoke excellent English but with a Scottish accent! He had worked on the oil rigs in the past. Amongst the other items of literature I gave him was a Russian children's Bible. The following day I went back to the ship to ask if he would translate something into Russian for me. He greeted me by name and did as I requested, then I asked what he did with the children's Bible. Oh, the Captain took that, he said. I offered him another one. He made excuses to my surprise but took it in the end. Then he said that he would read the book himself and then tell his children the stories. That's a different way of doing it but I hope his children will see the pictures.

One afternoon, when it was dark I stood muffled up in the cold, with a face mask on, waiting for two men to finish closing the hatch covers. They would then head inside and pass me as they did so. I had my back to the flood lights but to my astonishment the Filipino greeted me enthusiastically and explained to his Romanian officer that I was the man who gave them calendars and large money tracts. It was a mystery how he knew it was me. He said that I had come in 2017, '18 and '19 to the ship he was on at the time. He had never been to church with me or been in my home but I always came to visit he said. As a result he accepted literature and encouraged the Romanian to do the same.

Another Russian on a different ship - the **SP Venture** was so pleased with the children's Bible and other things that he spontaneously shook my hand - just like the days before covid. We hope for better days in the future when we won't have to worry anymore about shaking hands.

When I couldn't see the watchman of another vessel, I saw through the porthole which was level with the quayside, a Filipino in his cabin. You can imagine his surprise when I knocked on the glass. But it brought him and others onto deck and a well wrapped up watchman was sent down onto the quay to accept the scriptures that I offered.

When I started taking care packages to Lowestoft I couldn't visualise doing it past the end of last year but I had a message one day in January saying 'you're always welcome to send the care packages'. The company in Falmouth said something similar. Although I miss the contact with sailors themselves I could never have visualised being able to 'work from home'. Just occasionally we get feedback from the ships. Many times I have heard a little voice whispering in my ear that I might as well give it up, because I don't get a thank you, but what do I expect?! **Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, But to Your name give glory.**



As far as I know, none of the men who are involved in taking the scriptures out to the ships are Christians. At Christmas time I took the opportunity to send Gideon New Testaments to the five agents in Immingham. (this was the oil company who told me which ship's the Lowestoft boat might be going to) Well actually it was four, as the fifth got a Polish New Testament. And I couldn't miss the young lad in Falmouth and his boss. So in addition to praying for the crews who receive the packages I pray for these men by name too, especially the Levington crew who swear at me when I ask if I'm being a trouble.

As this letter goes to print, there are now very few tankers off Southwold. Apparently this is normal for the time of year. When it picks up I will be ready too.

Yours in His service

Keith Oliver