



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: Ang Buhay Sa Dagat – A Life at Sea
Comment: Insert Comment here
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Readings for this Sunday:

Old Testament	Isaiah 55: 1-5,10-13
Epistle	Romans 8: 9-17
Gospel	Matthew 13: 1-9,18-23

It was quite a shock I can tell you when Farther asked me to talk today about life at sea, talking to the officers and crew of a ship feels a long way from talking to you all today, I am quite nervous.

I went to sea at the age of 16 I am sure having been heavily influenced by my elder brother of 16 years, kuya Nigel. From the age of two and a half I had been taken on board vessels when my brother's ship would call at the United Kingdom fueling my imagination. It was at the age of 5 on the morning of my first day at school when my Mum asked me what are you going to do, referring I am sure to my new upcoming school experience when I stood to attention in my gabardine and cap and answered I'm going to be a sea captain.

I grew up in a coastal fishing village where the sea plays a very important role and the local churches carry many references to the brave fishermen who have lived and died in the waters of the Irish sea and Atlantic Ocean. It is quite common to find model ships in the churches and memorials to souls lost at sea. Sailors are very superstitious and god fearing bunch by nature and no seafarer underestimates the power of the ocean and all have a great respect for the sea even on the calmest of days.

I imagine you think 16 was an early age to leave home, I chose to go to sea rather than university, the thought of working in an office appeared rather sedate

compared to the images conjured up from the presents my brother would bring me back from places such as Trincomalee in Ceylon, as it was known then.

It was in late 1977 that I joined my first ship in Rotterdam, Holland loading general cargo and machinery for South America. My Mum appeared quite calm at the airport lots of hugs but not too many tears, it was only years later that she told me she cried all the way home and was awake every night worrying about where I was, but if this was the life I had chosen then she and Dad would encourage me.

Nothing can prepare you for the brutal shock of being out in the world on your own when still a teenager. I had a comfortable childhood in an affluent area of the United Kingdom. I was brought up High Church of England in a very closely knit family where we attended church regularly, although I was excited to be a sea I did feel very homesick, also I looked nothing like my sixteen years more like twelve. I was told never base your future career at sea on the first two or three ships.

On that first voyage we sailed across the Atlantic and through the Panama canal which links the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean through a series of Locks, a tremendous kaleidoscope of new experiences in sounds, smells and sights, ones I could never have imagined sat in my sleepy small childhood town. We spent three months on the West coast of South America, discharging cargo and then back loading with products to be brought to Europe. It was however at the first port of call out of the Panama Canal at Guayaquil, Ecuador that I had an experience that started me on my journey from childhood to being an adult; at sea you go up very quickly. I was 16 fresh faced and full of excitement to be going ashore, I set off in search of adventure. Reality is not like the neatly packaged travel guides, I was only a few paces outside of the docks when a young girl obviously very poor and no older than myself carrying a baby confronted me demanding I buy the baby from her so she could buy bread as she had not eaten for days. I am sure in hindsight this was her modus operandi, but to an innocent 16 year old from the promdi I panicked gave her all my money and ran back to the ship.

As my first few voyages passed I began to know I had made the right choice where else as a young man could one experience so much of life, while I did see some distressing and pitiful sights I saw so many that were wonderful and inspiring. While crossing the Atlantic we were to make acquaintance for over an hour with a blue whale that lumbered along side probably attracted by the rhythmic booming of the ships engine reverberated under water. To see such a large magnificent creature up close in his environment raising his bulk out of the

Ocean and breaching, slamming his body back into the sea was breathtaking. Dolphins too do not need training, in later years as a junior officer both as Third and Second officer I would marvel at schools of dolphins comprising of 100 or more who would play and leap in the bow wave or in teams of 30 to 40 go up onto their tails by the bridge wings of the ship and dance backward at tremendous speed, flipping and somersaulting.

What did happen in my early years as described in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* from Ariel's wonderfully evocative song, was a "sea change" in myself. I am not implying it was a conscious one, just that my experiences brought a very different perspective to life and all who have gone to sea at an early age all experience the distance and void that develops between childhood friends and oneself. You find that your friends appear immature and their problems petty and limited, I do not mean this in any way as a derogatory comment to my early friends just that we were now at different stages of progress to adult life and responsibilities. By the age of 20 I was a fully certified officer keeping a bridge watch on a vessel if stood on its end would be higher than the largest skyscraper.

It is only now in later life that I have valued even more the special time I spent as a seafarer, going to sea is unique, the ship is your home, your work, your recreation and your shipmates, both your fellow workers and family. There is no place on a ship for egos you must work together rest and play together. There is no 5 o'clock punch out time and go home and complain to your family about your work mates. You finish your work and then you sit down to eat together and then to watch a film or swim or play games together. During work you learn you need to trust your colleagues and during certain times place your life in their hands. When entering enclosed spaces or working aloft or over the ship's side and they act as the safety person to monitor you, whether in breathing apparatus down a tank or hoisted high aloft in a bosun's chair. A ship is a self contained unit a floating city, we are the work force the emergency services, maintenance, law and order and ministry all rolled into one.

While the ship is physically large over 1,000 feet in length and HTC well you could fit 20 off them in a single cargo tank, it is still a world with confined boundaries, the ship's side so it is of necessity that you all get on. A ship is almost an idyllic utopia, that in the actual world through politics and ignorance of others or more accurately lack of respect of others, can not exist. But given that there are only 30 of you on board in this small number where each of you are dependent on the function and responsibility and respect of the other then it does work. Yes there is a rigid system of hierarchy but respect is always two way whether cabin boy or Captain.

In the environment of a ship there is no class or racial distinction you are all souls on board that ship and only through working together does the ship safely and effectively get to her destination. One of the hardest tasks as Captain of a ship is learning to listen and that while you have sole responsibility for the vessel it does not always mean your way is the right way. It is a hard task to learn that a younger officer may actually have a better idea and recognizing this and accepting that idea. In daily life I think we see many times people who do not listen, I know I have to listen more especially when it comes to God and what God is trying to say and acceptance. I have sailed on several vessels where there was up to 6 or 7 different nationalities present with no cultural borders. From space there are no lines drawn on the earth showing each country and this is very true on a ship, how marvelous if the world as a whole could be one large ship.

Sadly it is not and I have experienced several war zones in my career, on board a ship there is tremendous camaraderie and everyone looks after everyone else. Many Filipinos are onboard international ships and currently there are about 220,000 Filipino seafarers deployed at anyone time from the Queen Mary 2, to large container ships and huge crude oil tankers. I was Chief Officer (number two on the ship) at the age of 25 and Captain at 30, it always amused me that at the age of 30 I was referred to as the "Old Man" a friendly shipboard description between shipmates to identify the Captain or where he is on board, where's the Old Man?. I am proud to say the majority of my fellow officers and crew on board were all from the Philippines and sailed without hesitation in and out of the Persian Gulf during the 1980 to 1988 Iran Iraq war and the Gulf War of 1991/92. These were some very sobering times for me and how surreal war can be and how close the bond between seafarers becomes. At such times spiritual belief plays a large part on the vessel with prayers and readings, also what I refer to as involuntary prayers and voluntary. Involuntary as it is amazing as all appear to pray to God when there is an incoming exocet missile or transiting the straits of Hormuz at night under constant threat of attack. Voluntary prayers in those who sought strength through spiritual guidance, I have to confess I fell between the two. Sometimes quiet meditation in my cabin during the peaceful interlude prior to entering the Gulf and then praying heavily on the bridge of the ship during an attack that God get us all safely through the night. The strange and disorientating feeling of all of this was how untouched the rest of the world appeared to be, and why should they as I myself have watched news articles of bombings and other dreadful acts but the thoughts and image has not been with me in the hours and days following. However if you are caught up in such instances they have a very dramatic impact, we would load Liquid Petroleum Gas (LPG) in the Gulf to bring to the Philippines here to Manila, Japan occasionally Europe and the United States, our cargo Butane and Propane which when mixed forms Shellane your cooking and heating requirements yet many had know idea in those countries the real cost of that gas. In retrospect I and my fellow shipmates were very lucky and maybe that well known expression "therefore by the grace of God" that we all made it with no losses. I and my shipmates all served on British or American

flagged ships which were escorted in and out of the Gulf during these wars under the umbrella of the Armilla Patrol. We would anchor in the calm waters and warm sun and try to relax for 24 hours before the transit in. Many of us would put lifeboats down and visit other ships and exchange films and books and invite others to dinner on board. We had several British officers come on board from a Panama registered tanker who would not be joining the convoy but making their own way a day latter.

Every seafarer loves to talk about his family and it is not long before photographs of wives children and even pets come out and are shared. We all had a good time and it was a week later we learnt that the Captain, Chief Engineer, Chief Officer and Second Officer had all been killed instantly when a sulphur rocket made a direct hit to the bridge of the ship inbound.

The head of the convoy would be a naval ship to execute the precise turns of the convoy. A large American aircraft carrier would be on station in the Southern corner of the Gulf and would put up F14 aircraft as first defense to take out incoming missiles. As a large gas carrier we were always number one, strict radio silence was required and all communication done via coded satellite messages. The convoy would be established in single file, as we approached the entrance to the gulf two warships would position themselves close to the side of our ship like two small toy cars placed by a large truck, but very comforting their presence was. Their role was to place two helicopters up above our station to shoot counter measures in the event the F14's did not take out the missiles, the last ring of defense was the warships themselves with the Phalanx system a computer controlled gatling gun which can deliver 7,000 rounds a minute and when it burst in to life even at a distance of 300 mts it is frightening. We undertook many upon many of these transits of the 10 years of the Iran/Iraq and then Gulf war. We passed on occasions many vessels that were sadly not part of any organized patrol I remember one French tanker the Gaz Fountain which we passed in the early hours of the morning just inside the straits which had taken a direct hit by an exocet missile and was burning out of control. Many at our destination upon delivering their heating and cooking requirements unaware of how the gas had got to them. After 7 months of duty on board one could do a final nighttime run with the patrol clad in flack jacket and helmet to arrive safely outside the gulf by 0600, leave by launch drive back across the UAE to Dubai, fly to the UK and by tea time sat with your parents in the local restaurant surrounded by familiar sights and people laughing and joking it all seemed so surreal.

I was Captain on the First British flagged ship to sail into Bandar Iman Khomeini after the Gulf war and the anchorage was like an elephants grave yard, the masts and accommodation blocks of sunken vessels rising up out of the water, in the early morning light, sea mist, and mirror like sea made it appear an ethereal setting as we slowly inched our way past them and into the port.

There are many references ashore to life at sea and many found in Church and in the Philippines. The nave for instance is French for ship shaped. The local term for a group of friends Barkarda is Spanish meaning a boat load of people or crew a close community on the ship translated ashore. The term Barangay is believed to come from the ancient Malay boat the balangay which early settlers are thought to have arrived in and formed coastal groups, villages.

It is at sea, deep sea that I and my fellow seafarers have felt the closest to peace and with God, those moments when you get a tingling down the spine and goose bumps. I do need ashore the focus of attending church and direction for my spiritual path A life at sea does not allow regular organized worship and what can only be described as spiritual moments come to you. On a clear moonless night in the Pacific Ocean thousands of miles from any shore, stood on a large ship is an awesome experience. If you go to the bow of a large tanker there is no vibration and no noise except the ocean sliding past, when you look to the heavens the sky is a myriad of stars no one inch is there a gap, millions upon millions of stars, the planets look so close, you feel so small and insignificant. You stand there in awe at the work of God, I have had tears form in my eyes from the experience and I can give you no explanation the sight can be over whelming and elicits close and fond memories to come to mind with a complete feeling of peace. How I wish I could show you, I am not eloquent enough to translate the very spiritual feeling that it is into a description. I have personally a hard time with images of God as depicted in the paintings from centuries ago, a man with a white beard sat in a large chair surrounded by angels, but I do believe in God the higher power. Stood there on a clear night feeling so small one can only wonder at the world and have complete knowledge that there is without doubt a higher presence.

I have come ashore now and sailing a different ship I have a family and no longer the senior officer that would be my wife, Alma. I have a beautiful family and coming home each day is priceless, as if all seafarers are truthful it is that saying goodbye to go away to join a ship does not get easier but harder each time.

I am a seaman on a much bigger ship now, I have a new Chief Officer, and a new Captain, and you my shipmates, I am sure our Captain will look after our voyage safely, but we need to believe in him.

Psalms, 107:23-30,

They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters; These see the works of the LORD, and his wonders in the deep. For he commandeth, and raiseth the stormy wind, which lifteth up the waves thereof. They mount up to the heaven, they go down again to the depths: their soul is melted because of trouble. They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wits' end. Then they cry unto the LORD in their trouble, and he bringeth them out of their distresses. He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still. Then are they glad because they be quiet; so he bringeth them unto their desired haven.