

KEEPING ON TRACK

The passage from darkness to light has special significance when at sea. During his 37 years in the Royal Navy, Ian Crabtree gained considerable experience and understanding of the importance of the watchman's role.

"Sunset, Sir!" "Make it so!" The opening commands of a centuries-old ceremonial act that takes place every night in a Royal Navy establishment or ship alongside, when the white ensign is lowered. At sea, sunset marks the time when the ship's navigation lights are switched on and the upper deck made secure. On a clear day with a good horizon, it is also the time when the Officer of the Watch on the bridge checks the accuracy of the gyro by take a bearing of the lower limb of the sun when it is a semi-diameter above the horizon. As dusk descends, the navigator will appear with his sextant, ready to take star sights which he will use to fix the geographical position of the ship. God's creation is being used in its limitless form!

As darkness falls, a sense of trepidation grows in the knowledge that, without light, the true nature of the world outside, with all its beauty and hazards, cannot be seen with the naked eye. A realisation of vulnerability dawns. What dangers lurk ahead? An unlit vessel? A submerged container floating just beneath the surface of the sea, undetectable until the ship's bow collides with it? An uncharted rock? In the darkness we rely on other senses and sensors to help us to navigate our way along: hearing, radar, sonar, night vision aids. But whilst these may detect an obstruction or the presence of something, they will not necessarily enlighten us to the nature of the object detected. We therefore sail on in faith, waiting for the dawn to appear and the sun to rise once more.

Sunset at sea Ian Crabtree



Taking a compass reading

The watchman forgoes his sleep to keep guard – if we are not watchful, we can be lulled into complacency leading us to miss the hazards before us and court disaster. Similarly, with our spiritual lives. We can become spiritually complacent, putting ourselves on autopilot and not watching out for those daily hazards that can trip us up. Just as the lookout on the bridge needs to constantly scan the horizon, so too we need to scan our spiritual horizon.

The cycle of sunrise, daylight, sunset, darkness, is reminiscent of the life of Christ. The sun rises with his birth and sets with his death, leaving us in darkness until he rises again in the resurrection of the new day. In the darkness we feel lost, vulnerable, uncertain, afraid. We are reliant on our faith to see us through the darkness in the expectation of Christ's second coming.

Advent is a time of anticipation, a time to wake up and start again. As the sun sets on the Church's old year, we need to take a bearing to check our spiritual compass and to check our spiritual position in the dusk that follows. Are we still on track, or have we allowed ourselves to drift, to be swept off course by sinful influences?

When the ship's watchman spots the lights of another vessel, he assesses the likelihood of a collision. Are the lights on a steady bearing? If so, then a collision is inevitable and avoiding action such as a change of course or speed must be taken to prevent a catastrophe. How does he know to do this? He has learnt through training and experience, through good preparation and by listening to his teachers and more experienced mentors. He has regularly practised his skill until he is proficient in dealing with unfamiliar and complex scenarios. To maintain that proficiency, the watchman needs to regularly practise his skill and test himself in new situations.

In our Christian lives we too need to constantly practise our faith and test ourselves in unfamiliar waters. Advent provides an opportunity to switch off the autopilot and take control of our own personal helm, to use the aids available to us - catechesis, bible study, homilies, retreats - to learn about our faith, to

listen more reverently and keenly to God's word and to ponder over it: what is God, my mentor, saying to me? What do I need to do to get back on my spiritual track?

As dawn begins to break, the navigator, sextant in hand, "takes morning stars" and calculates the ship's position. Has the course correction made last night put us back on track? Are we now in the right place to start the activities of a new day?

When the sun rises on Christmas morn, will you be ready? Will you be in the right place to welcome the Christ Child?

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