

A Reflection on Psalm 137, verses 23 to 28

Hello. I'm Alexe Finlay and my work involves marine safety and security. We deal with ports and harbours in the UK and abroad. We also are involved in the welfare of seafarers worldwide and that's made me reflect on Psalm 137.

Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the mighty waters;
they saw the deeds of the LORD, his wondrous works in the deep.
For he commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea.
They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths; their courage melted away in their calamity;
They reeled and staggered like drunkards, and were at their wits' end.
Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he brought them out from their distress;

Do we ever stop and think how everything we buy, in store and online, reaches us? 95% of goods transported worldwide, comes by sea. As an island community, that is even more pertinent to the United Kingdom. So ports, ships, seafarers, and the port industry ashore are vital to the global supply chain of food, medicine and other goods.

Before the coronavirus pandemic struck, Chaplains and volunteer ship visitors from maritime welfare associations boarded vessels worldwide, including Teesport, to offer help to the thousands of seafarers who pass through every year. Normally seafarers are transported from ship to a seafarers' centre or a supermarket, for relaxation, for a change of scene, the opportunity to go shopping, to buy telephone and mobile data cards, to stay in touch with family, to go to worship, whatever their faith, and to receive or pastoral support.

Now, this has almost stopped.

Many ship visitors are retired professionals, but they are over 70, so they have to self isolate. In any event, the vessels do not want people to board, lest they bring the virus into a quasi sterile environment – the vessel has been at sea, the crew has had no contact with anybody else. It is safe. Shore access is therefore prohibited. If anyone does visit – and this includes the ship's agent, who is the representative ashore of the Master, handing paperwork and stores - he or she wears disposable gloves, keeps two metres from the crew and stops at the top of the gangway.

Seafarers are anxious and feel cut off. Many are Filipino and try to check daily with their family, as coronavirus is also in the Philippines.

Many seafarers have been away from home for months and may be away even longer as crew changes and repatriation cannot now occur owing to lack of international flights. Contracts are being extended, often without consent, sometimes without the payment of wages and some seafarers are stranded in foreign ports.

While we consider this, think also about those marine professionals working in our ports: harbour masters, port operations personnel, pilots and tug skippers, crew, jetty operators, cargo handlers, port police and security teams. They are still working 24/7, keeping to safe distancing rules and continuing to ensure the safe and efficient operation of the UK ports. They too, "go down to the sea in ships", and those who used to be at sea know only too well what self isolation feels like, and have better coping strategies than most to deal with so called "cabin fever".

So next time you bemoan the lack of something you think you need, or a perceived curtailment of your personal freedom, or you are queuing at a safe distance to buy your supermarket groceries, please keep these familiar lines in your heart

O hear us when we cry to Thee
for those in Peril on the sea