



SEA SUNDAY 20 OCTOBER 2024

We gather here today to remember and honour all those who, as John Masfield wrote, go down to the sea in ships. Being a country surrounded by sea, we are dependent on the sea for our very well being. Many of us have boats for recreational use; many of us enjoy going out to fish. Being on a beach refreshes our bodies and souls. Jesus, too, enjoyed a barbecue on the beach as we learn from our gospel reading. But more about that a bit later.

Our commercial fishermen provide food for our tables especially prevalent as Nelson is perhaps the largest fishing port in Australasia. Port facilities are vital to import the goods that we cannot provide ourselves and we need them to export those which our trading partners desire. All those who go out onto the sea need to be kept safe in an environment which can suddenly turn violent. This environment is very hostile as evidenced by the tragic loss of HMNZS Manawanui two weeks ago off the coast of Samoa. So we need coastguards, marine police, lifeboats, weather forecasters, port workers and most importantly, we need to look after those who crew the ships when they are in harbour using facilities such as those provided by the Mission to Seafarers.

Today is the day before that great sea battle that effectively decided the outcome of the Napoleonic Wars in Europe and set the foundation stone for the British Empire built on sea power. In this city which is named after Admiral Lord Nelson, we are reminded of its significance. We have Hardy Street, Collingwood Street, Vanguard Street, Trafalgar Street all indicative of that day. So it is appropriate that we remember the Royal New Zealand Navy as it goes about its business on the seas. We also need to be thankful for the dedication of Naval Reserve and the Cadet Forces as they support their colleagues afloat.

As a former naval officer, I like to keep an open eye on what is going on in the maritime arena. It occurs to me that there are two other issues which are of increasing importance and will concern our futures. Firstly, we have an enormous Exclusive Economic Zone which extends 200 miles from our shores and part of the continental shelf on which we sit. As a country we are required by the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea to create 10% of this maritime zone is to be a marine reserve – New Zealand has only managed a very small portion of it which is a tragedy. This area needs to be properly overseen by patrol ships and aircraft, hence a requirement for the deployment of defence force assets. So there is a need to have a national Oceans Policy to ensure we abide by the United Nations ratified treaty and to include security both physical and environmental, safe shipping, scientific research programmes of the ocean, and sensible resource extraction.

Now for the second major issue. Many years ago, I was what we call in the Church of England, a rural dean responsible for some 59 parishes. One of the highlights of our calendar was a Deanery Evensong usually on a lovely sunny summer's evening with an invited guest preacher. I well remember giving my first sermon on that occasion. I looked hard for inspiration and then I found the now famous words of Martin Luther King when he addressed a rally against racial prejudice in America. "I have a dream. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up onto the mountain. And I've looked over, and I have seen the Promised Land."

So what is this mountain that we face? As I said at the beginning, we are essentially an island nation and we depend upon the freedom of the seas for our security and prosperity. But our Merchant Fleet has been allowed to wither away - we now rely on foreign shipping companies to transport cargoes to and from these islands. There are no longer any such New Zealand companies to carry our trade offshore or bring in the things that we need from foreign markets. Even the renowned Union Steam Navigation Company of New Zealand is no more. Gone too are other smaller shipping companies that used to work

round our coasts. There may be economies of scale at work here but perhaps they have gone too far and we are in danger of being left exposed.

So how do we transport goods round the country today? In large containers on the back of large trucks along roads that were neither built or designed to take these leviathans. To ferry these containers from one island to the other, they have to be delivered to either Wellington or Picton to ships that have proved to be unreliable and need replacing urgently. We do have existing port infrastructure in places such as Nelson, Tauranga, New Plymouth, and Napier. Rather than build more and more expensive motorways, perhaps we should investigate transporting them round the country by ship from the main container ports. It would be cheaper financially and better for the environment.

To achieve both these goals, there needs to be long term bi-partisan policies to cover the next, say, 30 years. And the Promised Land just over the mountain is a coherent, well thought out, nationally agreed policy for the benefit of all New Zealanders for many years to come.

None of these problems are new. King Solomon about 3,000 years ago wanted to build a Temple in Jerusalem for the worship of God. He wanted it to be magnificent to reflect the glory of God. It was to be about 60 metres long, 30 metres wide and 15 metres high. He commissioned enormous stone blocks to build it and to finish it, he needed planks of cedar. These were only available in Lebanon. So he invites King Hiram to provide them for a fee. But how to get them to Jerusalem? They made the wood into rafts and floated them down the coast where they were broken down and then transported to their destination.

Saint Paul makes extensive use of coastal boat traffic to get about on his extraordinary missionary journeys. There must have been many such small wooden vessels sailing up and down the coastlines on the Mediterranean. They carried all the goods to feed the trade routes as far as Damascus and beyond. Wine was transported in large amphora and grain in sacks. The rapacious appetite of the citizens of Rome was satisfied by these means. Some of these vessels must have been quite large. The one that Paul was on when he was shipwrecked on Malta had 276 passengers. And it is worth remembering that the gospel message was initially spread to the world by traders and seamen as they went about their business. This is true here in New Zealand too. [Samuel Marsden](#) of the Church Missionary Society as chaplain in New South Wales, officiated at the first service here on Christmas Day in 1814, in the Bay of Islands, at the invitation of chiefs Te Pahi and Ruatara.

In our gospel reading, Jesus uses a barbecue on a Galilean beach with some freshly caught fish to prove to his disciples that he has been raised from the dead. Later, he uses this episode to rehabilitate Peter after his threefold denial in Jerusalem before Jesus' trial and crucifixion.

Today we give thanks for all those who make our lives safer round our coastline and on the high seas. We pray for a consensus on a better way ahead for all of us in the future. So perhaps we can learn from past happenings in this day and age not forgetting that we have much to learn from scripture too. Large is not always better. Smaller vessels are very appropriate around coastlines using existing port facilities. Besides freeing up our road network, it would lead to a cleaner atmosphere and more money for important things like education and health. Opportunities to spread the good news of Jesus Christ exist every day. We must make use of our God given time for the benefit of all New Zealanders both ashore and afloat.

Reverend Nigel Whinney (Commander, RN, Rtd)

