

CHRIST CHARTING OUR WAY

Annual Service: Master Mariners

St Michael Cornhill

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Let me begin with a rather unusual journey, and one which I can be certain that not a single master mariner has ever made. It comes from the pen of Lewis Carroll:

‘ The Bellman himself they all praised to the skies –
Such a carriage, such ease and such grace!
Such solemnity too! One could see he was wise,
The moment one looked in his face!

He had bought a large map representing the sea,
Without the least vestige of land:
And the crew were much pleased when they found it to be
A map they could *all* understand.

“What’s the good of Mercator’s North Pole and Equators,
Tropics, Zones and Meridian Lines?”
So the Bellman would cry: and the crew would reply,
“They are merely conventional signs!

Other maps are such shapes, with their islands and capes!
But we’ve got our brave Captain to thank”
(So the crew would protest) “that he’s bought us the best –
A perfect and absolute blank.” ’

Now, having lived in Portsmouth for seven years with a *cinemascope* view of the Solent from our drawing room; having also lectured for Swan Hellenic for fifteen years all over the world, and pondered the daily charts pinned up on the ship, I’ve sympathy with Lewis Carroll’s Bellman and matelots! Perhaps a totally blank chart is, at the very least, the simplest. . . . But that then leads on to my second conundrum – what does a chart really mean in the middle of an enormous empty Atlantic Ocean or the vast stretches of say the Bay of Bengal? How does one navigate? Well, of course, I know in theory about radar and radio, about sextants and compasses.

But in Lewis Carroll’s day it was that much more challenging and anyway, what is that great poem, *The Hunting of the Snark*, about? Asked that question on many occasions, Carroll couldn’t answer. The nearest he came to an answer, was saying that one day a solitary line came into his head: ‘For the Snark is a *Boojum* you see.’ From that developed his great nonsense poem. Of course, poets hate people asking them what a poem meant. When asked that question about his great poem *The Waste Land*, T.S. Eliot replied: ‘I didn’t *mean* anything.’ In other words, make of it what you will.

Others have pondered where Lewis Carroll’s poem came from. Carroll and Edward Lear were the masters of Victorian nonsense. But Carroll’s real name was, of course, The Revd Charles Lutwidge Dodgson. He was an academic clergyman at Christ Church, Oxford and a mathematics don. He was no pushover, no ass – and more than one writer now believes that the poem was a sort of reflection, rather like Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, on our existence and on the meaning of life itself and those great things that trouble our mind.

In a way, then, a reflection to which this morning's brief biblical reading is the most profound Christian response. John, in his gospel, reports Jesus saying: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.' This most profound of all questions is one rightly provoked by the *profession*, or even *vocation*, to which your honourable company points us. What do I mean?

Well, first of all, the master of any vessel - from a fishing boat with a crew of four or five to an aircraft carrier with two thousand on board - or indeed of a vast cruise ship with seven or eight thousand people aboard - the master has a huge responsibility. For all those other people's lives are in his care - and indeed the lives of those in other vessels with whom his or her ship might easily collide.

But there is one further uniqueness to add to this in the case of the role of a master mariner. As in any leadership role the Master's is one of loneliness. But even more so when placed on the great expanse of an ocean. Masefield's *Sea Fever* speaks evocatively of 'the lonely sea and the sky.' It's here too that Lewis Carroll's verse speaks not only amusingly but movingly. For humour is not humour, that is, humour doesn't work if it is not in some way a play on reality. The charts and the sailors satirised in Carroll's poem touch real nerves in our experience.

Such fears, such responsibilities, such loneliness speak far more widely to our humanity. So the challenges to the mariners point us to the question of God and of our existence on this planet more sharply than most. Christ himself faced such loneliness with a troubled heart in Gethsemane. Our reading this morning is resonant with his fears there. But through his grace, through his divinity, we are promised an ultimate peace. Here in our reading, is a response to Carroll's uncertainties in his poem, there's a response to the mariner's loneliness and responsibilities. So as today we give thanks for your Company and for the sacrifices made for others by *all* Master Mariners we rejoice in Christ's words: 'Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.' Amen.

Reading

John 14. 27-31