

Sermon: Master Mariners 2010...

In his *History of the Second World War* Winston Churchill said, *The only thing that ever really frightened me during the war was the U-boat peril. This mortal danger to our lives gnawed my bowels.* Of course it was our seafarers in the Royal Navy and the Merchant Navy who bore the brunt of this peril in the bowels of many ships. Churchill says, *The passage of each convoy between the Forth and London became almost every day an action in itself.*

To give just a couple of examples from hundreds: twenty-seven of our merchant ships were sunk in one week in September 1940; and twenty out of a total of thirty-four in October the same year. Churchill said anxiously: *As November and December drew on, the entrances and estuaries of the Mersey and Clyde far surpassed in mortal significance all other factors in the war.*

The Battle of the Atlantic was a damn close run thing. And long drawn out. It was only when, in partnership with the Americans, we had established bases in Iceland and Greenland that our lifeline with the USA could be swept clean of the U-boat menace. The cost was frightful. In the Second World War, 4786 of our merchant ships were sunk with the loss of some 32,000 lives. It was part two of the seafarers' sufferings of the First World War when 3,305 ships went down and 17,000 were killed.

I wonder why it sometimes takes our country so long to honour those who gave their lives for us? I was thinking of the sixty-five years it has taken to erect a memorial to the 55,000 killed in the vital bombing raids on Germany. Then I read what Sir Bertram Hayes wrote on the eve of his retirement of the White Star Line in 1922. He said,

Seeing that such a fuss had been made over us while the war was in progress, some of us thought that when it was over the Merchant Service would receive the recognition everybody said it deserved, and that in the future it would take its part in the national life of the country. But apparently, it has again faded into the background of people's thoughts and I suppose it will need another national emergency to bring it back...

M.H. Disney's account of the first forty years of the Honourable Company of Master Mariners states ruefully, *The war was over and Britain wanted to forget it. A few honours, some fine words from a grateful Parliament and the Merchant Service was left to lick its wounds and get on with its business as best it might.*

It was in those years immediately after the First World War that the pre-eminent Master Mariner, Sir Robert Burton-Chadwick put his considerable mind to the task of ensuring proper recognition for the Merchant Service. He was helped by a speech from the American Ambassador, J.W. Davis, on 25th February 1921. The Ambassador said, *I deem it no exaggeration to say that, whether in war or in peace, the British Mercantile Marine has rendered more service to more men of more nations than any other human agency.*

Still, it was not until 25th June 1926, after vigorous and tireless efforts by a great many, that the Company was finally incorporated.

Then there was a wonderful breakthrough in the history of the fortunes of the Company. As Master of the Merchant Navy and Fishing Fleets, the Prince of Wales came with Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin to the Company's second banquet at the Mansion House on 21st March 1928. There followed a telegram from the King to say he was pleased to declare that the Prince of Wales was there as Master of the Company.

Disney describes this tremendous occasion: *The news took a brief moment to sink in and was followed by such tremendous cheering that Sir William Soulsby said afterwards that in all his experience as the Lord Mayor's Private Secretary he had never heard such a noise in the famous Egyptian Hall and that he feared for a time THAT YOUR MASTER MARINERS WERE GOING TO BRING DOWN THE MANSION HOUSE ROOF!*

On 1st June 1928 the King authorized the Company to use the prefix *Honourable* a distinction enjoyed by very few societies in the Kingdom and one which can only be granted by virtue of the Royal Prerogative. The Company's unique livery hall *HQS Wellington* was made fast in berth and the gangway ashore at Temple Stairs at five-minutes-to-one in the afternoon of 9th December 1948. So the Honourable Company of Master Mariners became fully established and equipped as one of the livery companies of the City of London.

This should encourage us to think for a few minutes about the nature and purpose of a livery company. What on earth is it for? First of all it is a trade, a craft, what the medieval guilds called a *mystery* with its own arts and skills. There was in those days, and there should still be today, a sublime aspect of the *mystery* – and that is a sacred calling. The ancient guilds and companies acknowledged that all their doings were to be ordered and arranged under the sovereignty of God. This is not a bauble. It is no mere lip service to a sentimental religious emotion. For as St John's Gospel tells us, *God is love*. God is love and nothing else. And the New Testament's word for that love is *αγαπη*, *charity*. So the first duty of a livery company, along with the practice of its craft, is charity.

Of course, there are those of a certain political persuasion and dogma who say that charity should be abolished and everything that's good should accrue to people by right. This is to treat human beings as if we were machines. To replace the Good Samaritan with the commissar. Whereas the soul of human beings is to respond, to be generous, to be warm-hearted, to give not just of our substance but of our being. To give not just of our salaries but of ourselves.

The second word we can dwell on for a minute is *company*. It means togetherness. It means a shared solidarity and a common purpose. For there are things which can be achieved only when people lay aside personal interests and desires for some common good. Livery companies are not clubs or sects or gangs of political opinion. They are institutions. And institutions are the corporate personalities of our nation. That is what is meant by our oath of loyalty to the Queen. Institutions are the lifeblood of the nation. They transcend sectional interests. You might say that we have institutions so we do not die of politics

What of the accusation that we are only interested in dressing up and eating and drinking? Well, the meaning and purpose of livery and company is to express joy, rejoicing, thanksgiving, gratitude. The

livery movement and the church are meant to be celebrations of the life we share which God has given us. We're not here for long. This life we have is a miracle, a mystery and a gift. Just think of it – the fact that we're here, that there is not *nothing* but *something*. And *there is no life not lived in community and no community not lived in praise of God*. There is such a thing as a Holy Cheerfulness for God's sake. As the Psalmist says, *This is the day which the Lord hath made: we will rejoice and be glad in it....*

So our livery, our vestments, are indeed outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual graces. And our clothes, gestures and actions are part of that grace. The same goes for those other great virtues of church and livery – I mean etiquette and courtesy. Manners are not just in the head: they are how we behave. They are not just words, but deeds accomplished by men and women who are bodies, parts and passions. Church ritual is just good manners towards God. And when the Lord himself commanded his disciples to remember him, he told them to do it over the breaking of bread and the drinking of wine.