

White Ensign Service

I tried to be clever on Monday. It is usually a mistake when I try to be clever. It was certainly a mistake on Monday. It is a long and dull story, when I try to be clever it is usually long and dull. The short version is that I was giving a lecture about cathedrals. Now it is a little known fact that the third English cathedral was built on the island of Lindisfarne, a mile off the Northumbrian Coast. I explained, in my lecture, that you build a cathedral on Lindisfarne it is because you want to be remote, you do not want to see people, you think religion is all about solitude.

Bad mistake, someone in the audience, someone smiling at me in the way you smile when you know that 'I am so much cleverer than you are' asked a question. 'You are not a sailor are you?' said smiling man. 'No' I said, "I am not a sailor". 'Thought not' said smiling man, just positioning himself for the kill. 'Lindisfarne was not remote at all; it was on an important sea lane'. Sea lanes; no, I had not thought of sea lanes. People went to Lindisfarne because, in the seventh century, plenty of people went by ship.

It is a point about thinking differently, seeing things differently. Years ago, trying to be clever again, I finished a thesis. I had spent years on this thing, far too long. It was pages and pages, it was words, and chapters, it was arguments and footnotes, it was intellectual property. Then I took the thesis to be bound, you had to do that, it had to look like a book not just a lot of pages, before you could submit it. I took my thoughtful argument to a binder. He never once looked at the words. He weighed it he turned it over felt the thickness, rubbed the pages to work out the quality of the paper. My thesis was not an argument to him, it was an object, you could prop a door open with it, or throw it at the cat. He saw it differently.

That is what this afternoon is all about, a Lord Lieutenant and Lieutenant Commanders, a Lord Mayor, Petty Officers, canons and vergers, a cathedral a white ensign - this is all about making new connections, seeing things differently. It is a Bristol thing, it is a Navy thing, a willingness to go the distance, think again, a readiness to think differently.

A few months ago, a new Dean in Portsmouth was appointed. The interviews took place in the residence of the Vice Admiral, in the dockyard. The new Dean of Portsmouth now knows about the Navy, he was escorted to his interview by a Lieutenant Commander, in uniform, and the Vice-Admiral, in uniform, chaired the panel. Portsmouth calls itself *the Cathedral of the Sea*. I have news for Portsmouth, we had been a cathedral for three hundred years before they were thought of, and Bristol was a port before Portsmouth was. Ships were sailing

out of Bristol to Ireland, then Iceland and Gascony, then Spain and the Americas from 1100 or earlier. This city was defined by the sea. Defined by trade and enterprise and of course by the terrible legacy of transatlantic slavery. Defined by adventure by John Cabot and William Weston the first English commander of an expedition to the New Found Land. Defined by sea going enterprise, the Plimsoll line, the SS Great Britain. That is generations worth of seeing things differently, thinking again, wondering what you might find. Bristol looks outwards, it always has. This is the city of thinking again, doing different.

The Royal Navy knows all about that. The oldest of our services, the most outward-facing, a place of constant encounter with the new and the different. In ports and harbours across the world for hundreds of years, the Navy has been fashioned in encounter. People joined the Navy because they wanted 'to go to sea'. They did not want to go to Timbuctoo or Tokyo, they wanted to go 'to sea'. They would go where the sea took them. It was open ended. It was what was possible, what was different.

There are dozens of people here who know more about the sea than I do. What I do know is what the bible says about the sea. What the bible says is that the sea is risky and it is mysterious. We got a glimpse of that in our first reading,

Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep? Job 38:16

If the Lord God wanted to remind us we knew nothing he would ask what we knew about the sea. People who went to sea took huge risks, Jonah, St Paul. The sea was there before the beginning, in Genesis creation comes out of the deep and the deep is unknowable. To commit yourself to the sea was to think differently.

That is why we are here, Bristol and HMS Prince of Wales, to celebrate a new friendship, an encounter. We bring together all that city and Navy know and represent so that we can both learn and think differently. This friendship makes us stronger, wiser, and more open to what is possible. It makes us better.

This a friendship we will think of daily in the cathedral. We will see that white ensign, walk beneath it. We will pray for the ship's company, we will look forward to your next visit. In this world of suspicion in which we live, this world where trust is so rarely given, in a world where we turn anything foreign into a threat, into migrants and refugees our friendship is a pledge that we can do better. We believe in thinking again, thinking differently, we believe in friendship, we believe in hope. Now that really is clever.