

* * * * *

ALMOST ALL AT SEA

* * * * *

The Revd Bruce F Neill, MA BD

Maxton and Mertoun with St Boswells

(Principal Chaplain, Church of Scotland and Free Churches
Royal Navy 1991 - 1996)

Having recently retired after almost a quarter of a century as a Naval chaplain, and having even more recently been inducted as minister of two rural parishes in the Borders, this is, I suppose, an opportune time to reflect on the kind of worship in which I was involved during my naval years. In any case I was first asked by the exceedingly patient editor of this journal to submit this article some three years ago !

I intend to discuss the regular Sunday by Sunday worship in which I was involved with a number of naval congregations both at sea and ashore. I have little to say about more formal occasions like for example the *Service for the Commissioning of Her Majesty's Ships*. The words and order used in such Services have evolved over the years and draw heavily on traditional liturgical material such as the Naval Prayer and the prayer ascribed to Sir Francis Drake. Although overtly the blessing of God is sought for the ship, the intention of the Service is to focus not on the grey painted hardware but on the men and women who will sail in her, and their families.

The Naval community is a young community. The average age of the average ship's company is 21. While one does find that a number of ex-naval people attach themselves to Naval churches ashore, it is nevertheless true that the typical members of a Naval congregation will be the single sailor in his early twenties, or the young couple, (husband quite possibly at

sea) with two or three very young children. They may or may not have been involved with a civilian congregation before joining the Navy. If there was a church connection before joining, that could have been anywhere in a wide spectrum of different traditions and denominations.

As a minister of the Church of Scotland I served in the Navy as a Church of Scotland and Free Churches Chaplain. "Free Churches" here is being used in the English sense and in reality means Methodist, Baptist, United Reformed Church plus Irish and Welsh Presbyterians. The Chaplains' Branch to which I belonged included ministers from all of these churches. All of us were required to minister to people who belonged to any of the represented denominations. In addition, when serving at sea I have rarely served alongside a colleague. When you are the only chaplain in a particular ship then you must offer a service which is as appropriate as it can be for everyone onboard who may wish to attend. And the range of expectations will be from those who feel at home in the Catholic tradition, whether as Anglicans or as Romans, to those who have come to faith in the context of an Evangelical or Pentecostal fellowship ! I have discovered that it is possible to compose a short service (30 minutes without hymns) of Holy Communion using material drawn from various Church of Scotland sources which both Anglicans and Roman Catholics have said they found quite familiar.

How do you prepare and lead worship against this background ? When I joined the Navy at the end of 1971 there was nothing pluralistic about my background. I am a son of the manse and I went straight from school to Glasgow University and then to Trinity College. The parish of which I was minister before being commissioned as a chaplain had within its bounds no other place of worship. There were in the nearby town Episcopalians, Baptists, Congregationalists and Catholics, and some of the clergy who ministered in these congregations appeared at the Ministers' Fraternal which was none the less heavily Kirk dominated. It was therefore a disturbing and confusing experience suddenly to find myself in a situation in which I was required to lead worship with a small congregation at least half of whom were neither Scots nor Presbyterian. The first naval congregation with which I was involved was in Plymouth, and many of its members were Methodist. They used the Methodist Hymn Book with which I was totally unfamiliar, and on alternate months the monthly Communion Service was according to the Methodist Order. The senior

chaplain under whose tutelage I then was, was himself a Baptist. I also now found myself in much closer contact with colleagues of the Roman and Anglican traditions, and I began to appreciate what I had always known but never noticed, that they accepted as normal a liturgical pattern the use of which was foreign to me, but the words of which were at many points exceeding familiar. I had not realised how much Cranmer there was in the order for Holy Communion in the *Book of Common Order* (1940) ! I had also to get used to hearing my familiar non sacramental order of service described as a "hymn sandwich"!

As I have hinted, this was initially a disturbing and confusing experience. When, slowly, I had dealt with the disturbance and the confusion, I was then ready to allow this exposure to other styles and patterns of worship to become a positive experience from which I have gained a great deal. I have come to value the fact that "my tradition" is one among many within the great family of the Christian Church and that it has been informed and shaped over the generations by valid insights and by authentic spirituality, but also by historical and sociological factors. I have come to focus my attention not on the elements which make "my worship" different from that celebrated by Christians of other traditions, but to note that there are large areas which we all have in common. And that, for me, has been a tremendously liberating experience. I have been enabled to worship with others using their form and order, and to find that what once seemed foreign to me, has become comfortable and familiar; that the words and actions of an Anglican Eucharist, for example, are perfectly able to help me to express my own spirituality. That is an insight which I have tried to communicate to those to whom I have ministered in the Navy. There is no place for the attitude which says: "If I cannot find a service in my own tradition, I will not go to church." I have tried to encourage the young people with whom I have had contact, most of whom will spend a considerable time at sea, to worship with and support whatever chaplain they may find in their ship, and to appreciate that Christian worship comes in many shapes and forms.

I have said much about my response to finding myself in a situation in which many of my native "liturgical assumptions" were no longer valid. Worship, of course, is an activity of the whole people of God and not of the minister alone. I have also already noted that naval congregations are young and that there will always be those among them who have little

previous experience of worship beyond attendance at occasional rites of passage for members of their family, or attendance at school assemblies. This creates a situation in which there is often little awareness of any tradition, and thus there is an openness to, and indeed often a desire for, innovation in styles and forms of worship. This for me has raised questions about what is acceptable and what is not, both in terms of the denominations which as a Church of Scotland and Free Churches Chaplain I was expected to represent, and in terms of what is fitting for the worship of God. Obviously this is an area in which heated debate is possible and perhaps even inevitable.

Worship as a Naval chaplain I have found to be an enriching and broadening experience. I return now to parish ministry in Scotland wondering which insights gained in my naval ministry I shall be able to deploy in my new situation in which I already discover a quite different set of expectations.

* * * * *

CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICES AT THE KIRK OF ST NICHOLAS, ABERDEEN

The Revd James C. Stewart, MA, BD, STM
The Parish and Collegiate Kirk of St. Nicholas, Aberdeen

* * * * *

Christmas Eve services, now of widespread occurrence, were rare in Scotland Parish Churches until after the Second World War. For long the East Church of St Nicholas was the only parish church in Aberdeen where such a service was held. It was instituted by the pioneering James Cooper during the eighties of last century. Under the long-standing leadership of J.M. Nisbet (Organist 1890-1935 and a member of the committee responsible for the Revised Church Hymnary) the church maintained its strong musical tradition and carols sung by the choir were the major component of the Christmas Eve services. Older members remember the service in the thirties as a great Aberdeen occasion with a considerable