

New North Road Baptist Church

1st of February

Dear Friends

When I was in my late teens my family helped navigate a Thames sailing barge down the Blackwater Estuary in Essex out to sea and up the Essex Coast as far as Pin Mill near Ipswich. This was my first experience of sailing and it was magical. Sailing Barges were long and splendid. Built to ferry small cargoes along the Thames Estuary, they were once a familiar sight on the waterways of south East England. Ours was called Reminder, she was built in 1929 and she was among the last to be built, a champion of races on the Medway and the Thames. She was eighty foot long and her mast was eighty foot high. By the time we shared in a happy holiday on board her hold had been converted to cabins with room for twelve guests and a small crew.

When we first saw the Reminder, it was on a cold day in winter where she was moored in the small Essex town of Maldon. My dad told my mum the small holes on her deck were for railings which wasn't true but it reassured her for a moment. In truth the great sail that could swing across the deck when she was changing direction could sweep someone into the sea so we learned to be careful. That winter's day it was hard to imagine her going to sea for at low water the Blackwater is simply a trickle through a lot of mud but at high water it's a different story as the tidal waters lift the boats off the bottom.

My memories of that week are of blue skies and sunshine and although I'm sure it rained, it was England after all, it was idyllic and although I was seasick one day when we rolled in the waves, too close to the coast at Clacton where we couldn't pass the pier, I don't remember a storm either. I was quite risk averse and didn't learn as much about sailing as I could have but when we were home again and I was lying in bed I missed the sensation of the sea, rocking us gently to sleep. In later years when I returned to Maldon I would often wander down to the quay and see Reminder moored by the river and marvel at the adventure we had shared.

It wasn't until many years later that I discovered the Swallows and Amazons series of children's novels by Arthur Ransome and discovered that two of them were set on the same stretch of coastline we navigated that summer. It is only now as I prepare for this

Sunday's preaching about Jonah and the Whale that I am recognising how much of our scriptures are about the sea. Of course, many people in the bible had no experience of being on the sea but Jesus called at least four fishermen to be disciples and used one of their boats as a platform for preaching. In the book of Acts there is a remarkable account of a series of storms and bad weather in the Mediterranean which led to a shipwreck on the coast of Malta. Acts 28. I want to focus on the words of a Psalm, Psalm 107 which captures the movement of a sea you can almost feel as you read it.

Some went out on the sea in ships;
they were merchants on the mighty waters.
They saw the works of the LORD,
his wonderful deeds in the deep.
For he spoke and stirred up a tempest
that lifted high the waves.
They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths;
in their peril their courage melted away.
They reeled and staggered like drunkards;
they were at their wits' end.
Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble,
and he brought them out of their distress.
He stilled the storm to a whisper;
the waves of the sea^[a] were hushed.
They were glad when it grew calm,
and he guided them to their desired haven.
Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love
and his wonderful deeds for mankind.
Let them exalt him in the assembly of the people
and praise him in the council of the elders.

As a young man I often used to listen to Radio four late at night when the station played a tune called 'Sailing by' before it closed for the night, a tune which seemed to capture the magical movements of the sea. I also listened to the Shipping forecast with

its litany of faraway names, sounding like poetry, and imagine sailors far out at sea tuning into the forecast so they knew what their weather would be like. Small boats on a big sea.

Sometimes we can feel like small boats on a big sea, facing unpredictable challenges that could overwhelm us, personally or professionally, in the lives of our families or even at church. At moments like that we may remember the words of that great hymn 'Will your anchor hold' inspired by the words of Hebrews 6 vs 19. We may also remember that Jesus slept in the stern of a storm-tossed boat and when his disciples woke him, panicking and convinced they would drown he spoke to the wind and the waves. 'Be still. If Jesus is our centre, we can be still and find our peace in him. This doesn't mean that there will be no need to spring it to action but it does mean that our God is sovereign and that we can overcome fear.

Small boat.

Big Sea

Great God

'The seas have lifted up O Lord,
the seas have lifted up their voices,
the seas have lifted up their pounding waves.

Mightier than the thunder of great waters

Mightier than the breakers of the sea

The Lord on high is mighty.'

Psalm 93 vs3,4

Your friend and pastor

Mark

