

Sunday 5th September 2021
Merchant Navy Service

Liverpool Parish Church

Hebrews 6 13-20

The Certainty of God's Promise

The catalyst for a standard set of clothing and insignia for the Merchant Service was the execution in 1916 of Captain Charles Fryatt, the master of a British merchant ship who had been captured by the Germans after attempting to ram and sink a U-boat. He was sentenced to death for his so-called illegal act of aggression – in other words because he was deemed to be acting as a pirate rather than an official combatant in a war – on the basis that he was wearing a company livery and not a service uniform when he killed German sailors.

The outrage that was sparked by Captain Fryatt's death resulted in representations being made by deck and engineer officers' organisations for the 'institution of a standard uniform for the Merchant Service'.

Pressure for a standard uniform had also come from merchant seafarers who wanted to wear it while ashore 'to indicate that they were on a service of national importance... and to avoid enquiries as to why they were not in the Army'.

The Board of Trade appointed a special committee, with members including officer representatives, shipowners and the Admiralty, to consider the issues. An Order in Council was issued in September 1918, prescribing a standard merchant service uniform in an attempt to prevent any repeats of the Fryatt incident. However, the development of the uniform also reflected a deeper desire to pay tribute to the huge sacrifice made by merchant seafarers during the war, with more than 14,000 being killed.

In a House of Commons debate in 1917, MP Sir Basil Peto expressed his hopes that agreement would be reached 'upon some uniform which will not be regarded merely as the livery of the owner of the ship and worn in that capacity, but which will be regarded as a mark of distinction

and as something which will show that these men have a definite part in the national organisation for the protection of their country in time of war'.

In 1919, merchant service uniforms were given legal protection through the British Merchant Marine (Uniform) Act

The regulations were consolidated in 1921 when a fresh Order in Council established new widths for the gold bands on officers' cuffs and epaulettes and prescribed in detail the style and material of the clothing for masters, officers, cadets and apprentices

The Order also laid down the specifications for the officers' cap badge: 'Gold Naval Crown over silver anchor (without cable); the anchor on red oval cushion with gold rope rim surrounded below and at the side by gold oak-leaves and acorns.'

The cap badge following the tradition of the Royal Navy's use of a "fouled anchor" in its own insignia. The Royal Navy's own use of the Anchor insignia originating from the 15th appearing firstly on the seal of the Lord High Admiral of Scotland in 1402 and then almost 200 years later coming into more regular use as the personal seal of Lord Howard of Effingham became the official seal of the First Lord High Admiral on his appointment in 1585.

Quite why an anchor should come to be internationally recognised as the symbol of maritime endeavour can perhaps be explained in our reading from the letter to the Hebrews.

The English word "anchor" comes from both the Latin word "ancora" and its Greek cognate 'ankyra' meaning "hook or anchor." Anchors have been a crucial part of man's existence since...he started exploring the oceans around him. The oldest known sea-faring hulled boat, dating to c. 1300 BC, was discovered off the coast of Turkey in 1982.

In ancient times there were two ways to travel—by land and by sea. If one travelled by sea in a ship and reached the desired port, an anchor was dropped overboard to secure and to fasten the ship to the bottom.

The hope was, of course, that the ship, so anchored, would be there when needed again.

The author of the New Testament book of Hebrews uses the anchor as a symbol, a metaphor of hope and stability for the Christian in the storms of life and during the death of life:

“so that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God would prove false, we who have taken refuge might be strongly encouraged to seize the hope set before us. We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, Hebrews 6:18. 19

In early Christian iconography one often finds on the tombs of the dead Christians in the Roman catacombs (c. late 100-400 AD), an anchor as a symbol of their firm hope in an eternal life with their Saviour.

Because early Christians were persecuted and had to hide their faith in Christ, their iconography became quite rich in its use of symbols. The anchor mentioned in Hebrews 6:18, provided just another way to express their faith.

For over 800 years this church has provided a Christian witness to the merchant ships and their crews as they have dropped anchor in sight of the “Old Church,” as described by Herman Melville in his novel ‘Redburn- his first voyage’ speaking of his own first visit to Liverpool as a young man in 1839 he wrote ‘well known to the seamen of many generations, who have visited Liverpool. It stands very near the docks, a venerable mass of brown stone, and by the town’s people is called the Church of St. Nicholas.’ A venerable mass of brown stone providing witness to the hope that we have because as believers we also have an anchor that is steadfast and secure, it is hope.

This hope is placed upon Jesus Christ himself. This is because this hope rests on God’s promise to Abraham and the oath taken that this promise would come to pass (Hebrews 6:13-18). Since the two, the promise and the oath, are intermingled and dependent on each

other, we know that our hope is steadfast and secure. This acts as an anchor for our soul keeping our hearts at rest so they cannot be tossed about or dislodged from a place of peace. This hope ushers us into the very presence of God, behind the veil and into the Holy of Holies.

In the past, the High Priest was able to enter into God's presence once a year with the sacrifice for atonement. There were many regulations that first had to be met. The High Priest did not enter in with confidence. In fact, the High Priest had to take a censer of coals and incense with him so the smoke would cover the mercy seat to shield him from seeing it, lest he die (Leviticus 16:12-13). This was sacred ground because God was present.

Now, we have a hope that brings us into the very presence of God, a way opened up and paved by Jesus. Unlike the Israel's High Priest, we are to enter boldly, "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

In fulfilment of both the promise to Abraham and the oath taken by God that it would come to pass, we have been invited to this place that was never accessible before.

This is because Jesus went before us and operates as our High Priest before God having made atonement for us.

I know that many of you here today will have served in either the Merchant or Royal Navy perhaps some of you in both, others of you will be here to remember loved ones who have served and who now lie at rest, all of you connected by the stories of those lives of service. May each of you find your anchor keeping your soul steadfast and secure no matter what life holds in the years ahead.

Fr Bill Addy