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„And the shepherds returned, gloryfying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.“

(Gospel according to Luke, chapter 2, verse 20)

Dear seafarers,

when I read this verse “and the shepherds returned”, some pictures appeared before my inner eye.

I saw the German captain, the Filipino seafarer sitting together with their family and friends. But then the day of departure arrives, saying goodbye to family and friends: a day with mixed feelings. On the one hand there is the satisfaction: “The shipping company and the agent need me and my skills.” I can look ahead: there will be sufficient money in the family budget for some months to come. Fine.

If there weren't the other side: I have to separate, to say goodbye to all those I am familiar with. Used to share happy hours, but as well used to the little frictions which creep into every relationship. I have to pull myself together; I cannot hold on to the happiness and good days however much I wish to. If it were in a film somebody would say: “The sea calls”. But let's be realistic: it isn't the sea which calls. It's the contract with the shipping company and the necessity to earn one's living.

I think we can understand those shepherds of 2000 years ago. It was probably hard for them to leave behind what they had just experienced. Extraordinary things had happened. Just imagine: a handful of people in a dark winter's night. It is difficult for them to keep their eyes open watching over the sheep, sleepy and chilly as they feel.

And then the explosion of light together with heavenly singing and a message specially for them. Too much for a simple man's head! One must hold on to such a moment!

That is why the shepherds go into the direction shown to them: to the stable, to the child in the manger, to Mary and Joseph. I cannot tell what they really saw there. Our imagination is influenced by many Christmas paintings over the centuries. We see them on postcards particularly during this season. We see Mary in a beautiful and heavy dress although she was only the wife of a poor carpenter. We see a smiling child in the manger with a halo above him. And a group of angels flying overhead – curiously watching, singing, playing music. Did the shepherds see all of that or did they just see the poor and bare reality?

I don't know. But I believe that they saw through the outward appearance. As it reads later on in our verse: “they had seen as it had been told them.” The shepherds counted on the word of the angel: “To you is born a Saviour today who is Christ, the Lord.” This message was an eye opener to them. Thus the stable became a palace, the manger a cosy bed, the poorly dressed woman became the heavenly queen and the damaged roofing the choir chairs of the angels. Above all: the just born child became the Saviour and the Lord of the world. The shepherds saw through the outward appearance because they trusted the word of the angel as the medieval painters had done.

It is likewise with us in the Seamen's Mission when we look at seafarers or even ourselves: outwardly there may not be anything special but we meet people knowing that everybody has been created in the image of God and that God has given him an eternal dignity whether he knows it or not, whether he behaves like an image of God or not. Perhaps only a few of us behave like images of God. But that does not change that man has received his dignity from God. That is why the German Seamen's Mission has chosen as guiding principle to be "support of seafarers' dignity". We feel obliged to support seafarers in their strive for a dignified life and to assist them when threatened by inhuman working and living conditions. Otherwise – and that is the bigger part of our work – we are just accompanying seafarers in their work enabling them to spend a few relaxed, at times thoughtful hours away from tensions and stress of work. Joy and ease is an important part of a dignified life.

To respect the dignity of a fellow seafarer and – if necessary – to protect it is not just a task at Christmas. To respect the image of God in somebody who is depending on me is a permanent challenge.

Back to the shepherds: they returned to their sheep. They have seen through the poor appearance. And now they are praising God. Not easy for us to understand what such praise may have been like. Perhaps we could think of the cheering when a national team wins the world championship. That helps us to understand how the shepherds felt. We today shall limit ourselves to the praise of God as we find it in the beautiful Christmas carols. We will listen to them now.

I wish you a blessed Christmas. •

Christmas sermon for the cassette of German Seamen's Mission by Rev. Jürgen R. A. Kanz,
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