

Do you want a Pilot?

Psalm 73

Let me give you a little conundrum.

My grandfather had a pilot's licence for 28 years, yet by the time he retired, had never flown a plane. How can that be? If you've not realised the answer, let me show you his pilot's licence.

His licence was from the Cardiff Pilotage District and was for the purpose of conducting ships, sailing, navigating and passing within the limits of the Cardiff Pilotage District.

I am reminded of him each time I go down to Landguard. Invariably one of the Harwich Haven Pilot launches are about. What does a Pilot do? Obviously in Harwich Haven, they don't fly planes!

The largest container ships in the world call at Felixstowe, and to do so they must navigate the waters of Harwich Harbour. The only way big ships can get into harbour is via a 14.5 metre dredged channel. It's quite narrow, particularly around Landguard point and it needs good local knowledge to get ships in and out of the harbour without running aground or colliding with something else. Even with all the modern technology, there is no substitute for local knowledge and it's the job of the Pilot to go on board and navigate these large ships in and out of port. In fact all ships over 50m in length coming in and out of the haven, whether bound for Felixstowe, Ipswich, Harwich or Manningtree must have a pilot. The only ships exempt are those whose masters hold a Pilotage Exemption Certificate – usually ferries and other ships which are very regular visitors to the haven.

My grandfather was a Pilot First Class which meant that he could pilot any size or type of ship that could fit into Cardiff, Barry or Penarth – coalers, tankers, refrigerated transports, general cargo, banana boats, military and even the royal yacht Britannia. The masters of these vessels knew that if he was on board, their ship could safely get through what were and are treacherous waters.

The piloting of ships goes deep into antiquity as local knowledge has always been essential to get ships safely into harbour. Although piloting of ships is mentioned in the Bible, down the centuries Christians have used the analogy of the Pilot to illustrate the way that God can guide us through life. The Bible never actually uses this picture, but in a maritime nation like Britain, the notion of how God pilots us through rough seas is quite a common one.

The first time in English writings I can find that God is talked about as our pilot and guide through life was a Puritan writer called Thomas Watson in the seventeenth century. He said this "The ship without a pilot rather floats than sails. That our thoughts do not float up and down in prayer, we need the blessed Spirit to be our pilot to steer us. Only God's Spirit can bound the thoughts. A

shaking hand may as well write a line steadily, as we can keep our hearts fixed in prayer without the Spirit of God.” And here’s another: “Oh, what mercy is it to have God to be our guide and pilot! ‘For thy name’s sake, lead me and guide me.’”

And in the Victorian period right up to the middle of the Twentieth Centuries, there was quite a lot of literary, artistic and musical output that focussed on Jesus, our Pilot.

Here’s a bit of Tennyson, a poem called Crossing the Bar. Many harbours have shallow bars at their entrance which it takes good navigation to cross to get in and out of the harbour. Here Tennyson ponders the dangers of life and of entering death without someone to navigate.

Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me!
And may there be no moaning of the bar,
When I put out to sea,

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
Too full for sound and foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness of farewell,
When I embark;

For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crost the bar.

There are loads of hymns and quite a few pictures of Jesus being our pilot that stretch through the romanticism of the Victorian period and right into the Twentieth century when the sea became less romantic as ships lost their sails and carried tin boxes, and pilots flew planes. There are hymns from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries about Jesus being pilot.

Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us, O'er the world's tempestuous seas
Do you want a pilot, signal then to Jesus.
Jesus Saviour pilot me.

As I said although the Bible doesn't use the picture of Jesus as a Pilot who leads us in the words of one hymn “over world's tempestuous sea”, but it does clearly tell us that for all those who trust Jesus and place their life in His hands, He will guide.

Here's what we read earlier Psalm 73: 23 Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterwards you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

I find these verses a good reminder when we find ourselves going through the storms of life, that there is one who will lead us through them. He is one that sails with us through all the buffeting and dangers of life. He does not guarantee us calm, but he does guarantee that we will reach His heavenly harbour at last.

So as we come to communion this afternoon, let's affirm that we have taken on board our Saviour, the One who has died for us – His body broken and blood shed that enables us to sail into that heavenly harbour. Let's affirm our trust in that this afternoon, and renew our resolve to keep listening to the Pilot's instructions.

*Preached by Mark Reid
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