

Friends in unexpected places

STANLEY was my first encounter with a Chinese seafarer. He was actually the first seafarer I ever met. On a ship with British officers, and with the rest of the crew being Chinese, you might think that Stanley was comfortable: he was in employment with a shipping company that really looked after its crew. Well paid and respected, Stanley was efficient and effective in his work, always displaying a productive work ethic and a pride in his seafaring profession.

However, this outward appearance hid a deep hurt and discomfort. Stanley did not fit in on board. He was different and therefore held in suspicion. The officer-crew distinction was normal, and in this case was emphasised by the racial divide, so Stanley did not fraternise with the officers. As a Christian, he was held at arm's length by his countrymen. No one really came close to him, no one understood him, or rather, wanted to understand him. Stanley was, to his fellow nationals, a strange man who did not embrace cultural norms. He was regarded as someone who had turned his back on his traditional affiliations of religion and politics, and so he was ostracised: he was alone.

Being alone on shore is one thing

but to be alone at sea is to be in desperate isolation. Shunned by his colleagues, Stanley's daily life could have been a terrible "black hole". But in the depth of his solitude Stanley found a friend, a constant companion, one whose presence was comforting, strengthening and dependable. When all others turned their backs, Stanley's friend remained faithfully at his side. Stanley drew great strength and resilience from his one friend on board. This friendship made the daily routine not just tolerable but worth living.

Over time the crew saw in Stanley a strength of character that made them question what it was that sustained him. Even so they were still slow to greet him and rarely spoke to him. Perhaps this was because Stanley was a mystery to them. They knew they were being unkind, knew that they hurt Stanley every time they ignored him but somehow or other Stanley did not allow his isolation to mar his character. Stanley was optimistic, light-hearted and buoyant. The officers recognised in Stanley someone who was reliable and grew to respect him.

When I met Stanley I was a young student. I had no home and my family

were at a distance, not just geographically, but also a long way from understanding me – and me them. With little or nothing in common with other students in my year group, I was feeling alone and frankly, somewhat lost. I identified with Stanley, understood his loneliness and knew the need for a friend. I was impressed with Stanley's resilience and his refusal to become bitter or angry. Stanley's smile was his hallmark and he radiated a sense of wellbeing. Against all the odds he was not dour or glum but cheerful. And he was an inspiration.

Stanley found his friend had crept up on him unnoticed. There was no moment of introduction, no dramatic encounter. Stanley came to realise that they met in the quiet of his isolation. At the point when Stanley most needed companionship, his friend had quietly come alongside. In prayer and contemplation of God, Jesus has entered Stanley's life. The faithful friend, the one who had broken the isolation, the one who had reached out to Stanley when all others turned away was the inspiration for Stanley's life.

If you are alone, if you need a friend, God can give you one.