

“Give and you shall receive”

The Chinese watchman on a freighter at Hartlepool docks welcomed me with English that was better than my Chinese. I told him about the Seafarers’ Centre, telling him what facilities we had to serve him while he was in port, including free transport into town. The next day I was back, expecting to take a carload of seafarers to the Mission, but no. The crew had already wandered around part of the town, taking many photographs, and now some of them wanted to go to the other town – the old town they could see from their ship, to see the lighthouse and the old church.

Three of them came with me and on the way I picked up my keys to the old church, of which I am the vicar. We visited the promenade and they took photos by the old lighthouse. Then we went to the church they could see from the ship, and they came in and took more photos. They had very little English between them, but they looked at a display of photos taken by one of our Mission volunteers and saw I was in them. “You,” they pointed out, and one or two started to quietly call me “Father.” In beautiful writing, they wrote their own names and their ship’s name into our visitors’ book, each name a little picture. They kept saying “beautiful,” and thanking me very much.

Afterwards, I took them to the supermarket, and when we returned to the ship I was invited to come back later and eat a meal on board. As I left the ship this time, the friendly watchman asked me for a Bible. I knew I had no Bibles in Chinese languages, but said I would bring him one in English. So at 6pm I returned with a Bible for the watchman, who was very pleased to receive

it. In the mess room I was given a lovely meal, and they waited on me, and they waited for me. No hurry.

Then I took another seven seafarers to visit the old town. We squeezed into the Mission car and found our way back to the lighthouse and the church. There were more photos (I took some as well), and more beautiful signatures, and once more we went to the supermarket. The seafarers thanked me for the help I had given them, but I wanted to thank them too for their hospitality, their food, their friendship, their handwriting, their delight and their smiles.

When we learn how to give, we receive far more in return. Jesus said, “Give, and it will be given to you” (Luke 6:38). It was me, a Mission chaplain, who went to the ship. I was coming on board to serve them, but what had happened? I had been served by them – across the oceans, across the barriers of language, faith and culture. They served me, and left me with an unforgettable memory and a way of understanding Jesus’ words: “whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40).

Each person is one who can serve. Each person is one who can receive, and often we receive when we are the ones who thought we were serving. Perhaps the secret is to recognise in the other person – and in ourselves – the likeness of Christ; each person made in God’s image. And when we do serve, we often get back more than we gave.

“May you see Christ in others, be Christ to others, that we may dwell in him, and he in us” – Celtic prayer.