

# Making your ship a welcoming place

IN THE last issue of *The Sea* I wrote about Stanley, the Chinese seafarer who was the only Christian on board his ship. Further reflection on this great man has taught me many things that have helped me through my life's work.

Stanley could not speak of his relationship with God with anyone; no one else would pray with him, sing praises or engage in any worship. So how do you feel if you are in a minority on board? How do you respond? Are you a lonely soul?

You may feel isolated, or alone, because you are the only one on board from your country. You may express political opinions, religious beliefs or moral standards that set you apart from others, or put you in conflict with your colleagues. Your dietary preferences or sexual orientation may not appeal to them. Culturally, you may be very different from others on board. Even language may

present barriers to proper communication and the understanding of each other. On board, where you meet and work with the same people every day for months at a time, those who are different from the majority are more noticeable by the very fact that they are in a minority and the truth is that many people feel uncomfortable around those who are "different". Perhaps differences of faith are the most difficult to understand and therefore less easy for people to tolerate.

Most Christians regard worship as a community activity enjoyed by all when they come together. Does this mean that you cannot be a Christian without joining others to express your faith? If Stanley had been told that 'this is the way it is' he would have been distraught to think that he could not worship fully. Much of Christianity is focused on group activity and sharing the blessings that come from faith. It is also true that it is so

very important to have a right relationship with God. Most religions encourage people to discover the truth of God, to explore how they can respond better to God's promptings, to discern God's will for them and to pursue a right relationship with God.

Seeking enlightenment can take many forms. One can speak with wise and mature people of faith and observe the practical working out of faith in acts of charity. The care and concern undertaken by faith-based organisations such as The Mission to Seafarers and our colleagues, together with the compassion expressed for the suffering of others often illustrate a maturity of faith.

Meditation and the contemplation of life's mysteries can help with insights that perhaps pass us by in the hustle and bustle of life. The way in which people interact with the marginalised, disadvantaged and dispossessed often shows their underlying attitudes

towards the underprivileged. Christians take care of the lost, the least and the last but this is everyone's responsibility.

In the close confines of your ship there is no room for keeping someone at a distance just because they are different from you. Does your behaviour cause others to feel they are excluded and that you are aloof and ostracise them? Do you promote the social life of the ship? Do you try to make sure everyone on board is included? Are you an example of someone who seeks to understand, break down barriers, and extend the hand of friendship? A lack of understanding leads to doubt; doubt leads to fear and fear leads to hatred.

Do not allow your ship to be a cold dark place of discrimination and hatred – be inclusive and make sure no one is alone and lonely.