

Bereavement

THE young seafarer was called Tim – Tim Junior. It was back in the 1980s and the ship he was working on was in dry dock, being repaired after an explosion at sea. The work took weeks and so we got to know Tim and the rest of the crew quite well. Tim and his wife were about to have their first child, but there was trouble brewing on the horizon. One day, we learnt that Tim's father was very ill. At that time, there were no mobile phones, no emails, no Skype, or Facebook. Just letters and phone calls, from landline to landline, if the family had access to a phone. Information took time to come through and Tim was anxious.

We tried to be there for Tim. He would phone and speak to his family, desperately wanting to be there for them – his father, his wife and his newborn child. His friends on the ship were very supportive, but his father's condition worsened, and sadly he died.

Tim was torn apart, and we talked things over many times. We listened, we prayed, we lit candles, we said mass. Tim could not decide whether to leave the ship to get home to be with his loved ones, or whether to stay and continue to feed his growing family. For days he agonized over the choice. He could not afford to leave his contract and fly home, only to end up stuck in Manila waiting for work. But neither did he want to miss the opportunity to say 'farewell' to his father – and to meet his first child. In the end, Tim stayed, and the ship sailed.

Such great moments of crisis are bad enough for those of us who live close to our families. But for seafarers, the

difficulties and pain are multiplied. It will not be every day that such crises come, but when they do and you are far from home, or hear news many days after it has happened, you carry a heavy burden.

Today, we live in a world of instant communication. Would that have made things easier for Tim? I wonder.

In some ways, in our new world of instant communication, we are losing touch with who we are and how we feel. We are drawn into ourselves and perhaps into our shadows. Cabin doors are shut as wifi becomes more common, encouraging each seafarer to withdraw into their own world. It is important that we try to break away from this isolation and make efforts to be with other crew members in shared spaces, relaxing, but not alone. For when the crises come, you will need support around you, and friendly crewmates, to help you get through them.

When you experience a crisis in your personal life, keep the channels of communication open. Try not to be on your own all the time, tell the captain what has happened, and try to get ashore if and when you can. Perhaps the change of scenery will help, and there may be a seafarers' centre in port where you can have counselling, or simply use the chapel to be quiet in, light a candle, pray and remember.

Be kind to yourself. If it is loss that you are suffering, you may go through a whole range of emotions – anger, disappointment, regret, heartache, gloom. Use wifi or telephone to be with those you love and share your pain. And pray if you do. Your prayers don't have to be sophisticated, or clever – simple prayers are just as good to help you connect with God. When we pray, we reach out. So when a crisis comes, reach out to others, reach out to God and reach in to your own depths for the strength you need.