

Extending the hand of friendship

IT IS with a heavy heart and troubling anticipation that I approach reading a newspaper or watching news broadcasts today. This is because so much of the news is dominated by war, civil unrest, and, most worrying, the vast number of refugees fleeing from gratuitous violence and desperately seeking safety and security.

The turmoil and any subsequent displacement is hard enough to bear for those caught up in it; it is also of grave concern for those whose families are or may be affected by ethnic, tribal and very sad to say, religious intolerance and violence.

Most seafarers look on from afar, unable to help their loved ones at home when they receive word that their towns and villages are under attack. They may not have heard from their families and may be unable to contact them.

Sadly, it seems that people who have for years peacefully co-existed side by side as thoughtful and helpful neighbours retain the capacity to inflict violence on one another. Fear causes them to turn on their own community with brutality, seeking to claim superiority.

It seems to me that at the heart of the many troubles that beset so many is ignorance, ignorance of their own faith and the different codes of conduct that inform other faiths, cultures, and heritage. That ignorance, if unchallenged, turns to concern and worry. Worry then develops into hatred and fear. When people are fearful they become defensive.

In this cycle the best form of defence is believed to be attack. So we have the perfect storm of violence and we witness the descent

into chaos and barbarism. Anarchy rules so many of the hearts and minds that are infected with the need to gain the upper hand, dominate and subjugate those around them.

This scenario was played out when a new figure became popular in the cultural and political scene of Roman-occupied lands. Jesus Christ was a person who preached peace, with an emphasis on care and concern for one's neighbours.

Putting such principles into action seems to be a lot more difficult than resorting to violence. The conduct of peace requires tolerance and grace. It focuses on listening carefully to the concerns of others and ensuring that nothing we do causes offence. This requires much effort on our part to understand those things that are vital and precious to the lives of others. Resorting to legal debate and argument is a sure sign of failure, because along with rights come responsibilities and all too often people claim their rights but deny responsibility.

At this time, when so much of the world is in conflict there is a particular need for seafarers to recognise that many of their fellow crew members are from countries that are caught up in civil unrest, and various kinds of conflict. I would beg them to please recognise that their colleagues are anxious and worried by what is happening in their home countries whether it is in the Ukraine, Libya, Syria or indeed many places that are not at the centre of media attention. Consideration and empathy is required by all if the hand of friendship is to be extended.