

Growing through giving

I was on a ship a few days ago, and noticed the captain's screensaver – it was a photo of a beautiful bird, a bald eagle. Speaking to him about it, I learned that the captain loved eagles. He lived near countryside where these birds flew, and had carvings and pictures around his house of various species of eagle. On another day, a seafarer who came shopping with me wanted some fridge magnets, so we searched until we found some. He told me tried to get a magnet in every port to put on his fridge.

The trouble with being a seafarer and a collector is that you have to leave your collection at home, often for many months, when you go away to sea. It is just one of the many personal things a seafarer must give up in the service of their job. Of course, there are greater personal costs for you than your collections. You have to leave behind your wives, husbands and families; those you love most have to be put to one side for long periods, and that must mean a great deal of hardship at times. Thank God for email, Skype, mobile phones and Facebook. It was

a lot harder before these new ways of communicating came along.

Even at sea, there must be times when you have to abandon your own needs. You might be relaxing and watching a good film when you have to do an extra duty. You might be a cadet officer, and working all hours. You might be the master of a ship with emails, reports, documents and statistics that all have to be completed, while the good bits of life feel squeezed out.

There are times when I have a lot to do and have planned out how I will use my time, but I am unexpectedly called away to do something else. It may be that someone is sick, or in hospital. It may be that an errand needs to be done. It may simply be that I am needed to chat to someone for a few minutes, or spend a few seconds offering a smile or a helping hand.

As Christians, we are often called to give ourselves up for others. Jesus was the master of giving himself to others – to individuals, small groups and crowds of people – but he always did so in the context of a daily rhythm of prayer and time spent alone. He said that in

order to find ourselves, we have to deny ourselves, take up our cross daily and follow him. He taught that unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains a single seed. But if it falls and dies, it produces many seeds. In the same way, we too have to make sacrifices in order to grow.

Some years ago there was a great film, 'Chariots of Fire,' about the Scottish athlete Eric Liddell. His parents were Christian missionaries, and had strict rules about keeping Sundays special. But Eric was known as the 'Flying Scotsman' as he was such a fast athlete, and he was a sure bet for the 100-metre team for the 1924 Olympics. Then he heard that the 100-metre race was due to take place on a Sunday. He refused to run on a Sunday, so the team coach decided to chance it and put him in the 400 metres instead, far further than he was used to running. Yet Liddell went on to win the gold, and smashed the world record. Eric Liddell was prepared to stand by and let others win because of his commitment to God. He had to abandon his own ambitions in order to grow. Could I do that?