

Stella Maris

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December 2019

Inside

Sunday at Sea
with Fr Colum Kelly

Port Focus
Valletta, Malta

Advent and Christmas
The true meaning

The Good Life
Holidays Away From Home



**Apostleship
of the Sea**

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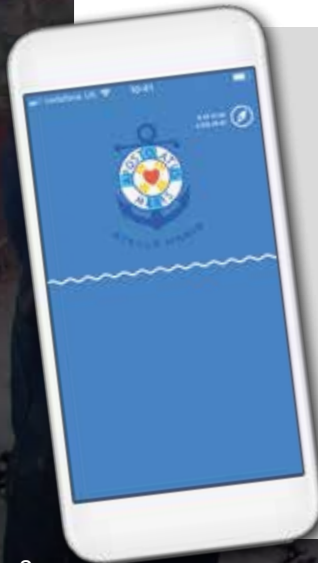
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Stella Maris provides seafarers with **practical support, information and a listening ear**



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Port Focus Valletta, Malta



The Great Siege of Malta by the Turks was heroically ended by the Knights of St John and the inhabitants on the eve of Our Lady's birthday, September 8th, 1565. The following year the foundations for a new fortified capital to meet any future attack were laid. Subsequent years witnessed the embellishing of the rocky promontory named Valletta after the victorious Grand Master Jean De La Valette with such magnificent buildings as St John's Cathedral one of the most magnificent churches in Christendom and the Palace of the Grand Master.

Knights from of the Languedoc region of France brought to Malta their own special devotion to Notre Dame De Liesse. The small church dedicated to Her in Malta was consecrated in 1620, close to the sea front and in full view of the famous Grand Harbour the church serves as the centre for the Stella Maris in Valletta.

The voluntary work amongst seafarers was done by the Franciscan Friars Minor mainly among personnel of the British Navy. But when Malta became a Republic all foreign military personnel had to leave. The Dockyard today is run by an Italian Company. In 1988 the Malta FreePort was inaugurated on the other side of the island as the first transshipment hub in the Mediterranean and has now become the twelfth busiest port in Europe. The mission of Stella Maris increased because of the good number of Seafarers especially from the Philippines and the number of tankers and container ships entering the FreePort.

Every weekend, Saturday and Sundays, members of Stella Maris visit a number of ships and when permission is granted, Mass is celebrated on board



for Seafarers. Today the Mission is served by priests of Maltese Diocese.

In 2016 a house adjoining the church of Liesse was refurbished with the help of the Grand Harbour Regeneration Corporation and the ITF. It now serves as a Seafarers' Centre. This centre is equipped with all necessities for seafarers who must spend a number of days in port because of medical problems or abandonment of the crew by the owner. Everything is provided free including lodging, food, clothes and pocket money.

Stella Maris seafarers' centre

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Valletta,
Malta

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Sunday at Sea

First Sunday of Advent

1st December 2019

Commentary by Fr Colum Kelly

Gospel Matthew 24:37-44

Jesus said to his disciples: 'As it was in Noah's day, so will it be when the Son of Man comes. For in those days before the Flood people were eating, drinking, taking wives, taking husbands, right up to the day Noah went into the ark, and they suspected nothing till the Flood came and swept all away. It will be like this when the Son of Man comes. Then of two men in the fields one is taken, one left; of two women at the millstone grinding, one is taken, one left.

'So stay awake, because you do not know the day when your master is coming. You may be quite sure of this that if the householder had known at what time of the night the burglar would come, he would have stayed awake and would not have allowed anyone to break through the wall of his house. Therefore, you too must stand ready because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.'

“...you do not know the day when your master is coming.”



The Gospel and You

As we begin the new liturgical year, there is a note of urgency and a call to alertness in our gospel. This might provide with a clue as to the meaning of Advent.

The Gospel consists of parables about the coming of the Son of Man and highlights the unexpectedness of it all. The pictures of the two men in the field and the two women at the millstone emphasize the suddenness of the coming and the urgency of watchfulness while we carry out our everyday duties.

Advent reminds us of the three comings of the Lord – the coming in history over 2000 years ago; the coming in glory at the end of time when God's plan for human kind will be realized and his hidden coming in the happenings of daily life.

If we can learn in these weeks of Advent the importance of patient waiting we have learned one of the greatest lessons in life. This is hard for us, especially because we live in an instant age – instant food, instant communication, instant everything. However, the most important things in life cannot be rushed and require patient waiting.

Advent is also a time for listening. If we do not listen to God's word and his pleadings, then we will never appreciate his living amongst us or be ready when he comes to us for the final time.

On our ships it is impossible to follow the neat divisions of liturgical seasons. Day follows day, and for seafarers there are no signs of Advent that we associate with our churches; the vast swathes of purple, the advent wreath and candles. Our calendar and prayer book tell us that a new season has begun. Maybe a chaplain will come on board before Christmas to help with an Advent service or perhaps bring an Advent wreath and candles, three purple and one white. Today we would light a purple one as a sign of Hope in this new season.

Second Sunday of Advent

8th December 2019

Gospel Matthew 3:1-12

In due course John the Baptist appeared; he preached in the wilderness of Judaea and this was his message: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand.' This was the man the prophet Isaiah spoke of when he said:

A voice cries in the wilderness:
Prepare a way for the Lord,
make his paths straight.

This man John wore a garment made of camel-hair with a leather belt round his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judaea and the whole Jordan district made their way to him, and as they were baptised by him in the river Jordan they confessed their sins. But when he saw a number of Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism he said to them, 'Brood of vipers, who warned you to fly from the retribution that is coming? But if you are repentant, produce the appropriate fruit, and do not presume to tell yourselves, "We have Abraham for our father," because, I tell you, God can raise children for Abraham from these stones. Even now the axe is laid to the roots of the trees, so that any tree which fails to produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown on the fire. I baptise you in water for repentance, but the one who follows me is more powerful than I am, and I am not fit to carry his sandals; he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fan is in his hand; he will clear his threshing-floor and gather his wheat into the barn; but the chaff he will burn in a fire that will never go out.'



Like many of the Prophets of the Old Testament John appeared a bit eccentric, dressed in a garment of camel hair, similar to Elijah. He lived simply and we are told crowds flocked to hear him preach and to be baptized by him.

The Gospel and You

Today Matthew introduces us to one of the most fascinating characters of the New Testament. This was the same John born to Zachariah and Elizabeth, whose miraculous birth to this elderly couple was announced, along with his call to be the forerunner of the Messiah, in the gospel of Luke.

Here John the Baptist appears in the wilderness as the one who prepares the way of the Lord. In his preaching he calls for repentance because the kingdom of heaven is at hand, and he warns that baptism brings with it the call to bear fruit worthy of repentance. This preaching of John contains the identical message at the centre of Jesus's call: "repent for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand" They both demand a radical conversation in expectation of the final coming of the Lord.

He took great risks in his preaching, unafraid to confront the Pharisees and Sadducees John the Baptist spoke out for justice, against the corrupt authorities of his day. By doing so he could prepare his people for the coming of Christ. And in some ways his message was very simple.

To the ordinary people, he tells them to share what they have – their clothes and food – with those who are in need. If they are really to repent that is, if they really want to change their lives, they will become brothers and sisters to others – even total strangers. In this way repentance becomes more than a mere use of words. John cries out for action now before it is too late.

Onboard we light the second candle of Advent, proclaiming Love, not only on our ships but in all the places we visit and in the wide variety we meet. May John the Baptist's words inspire us never to be afraid to proclaim the word of the Lord.

Third Sunday Advent 15 December 2019

Gospel Matthew 11:2-11

John in his prison had heard what Christ was doing and he sent his disciples to ask him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or have we got to wait for someone else?' Jesus answered, 'Go back and tell John what you hear and see; the blind see again, and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised to life and the Good News is proclaimed to the poor; and happy is the man who does not lose faith in me.'

As the messengers were leaving, Jesus began to talk to the people about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swaying in the breeze? No? Then what did you go out to see? A man wearing fine clothes? Oh no, those who wear fine clothes are to be found in palaces. Then what did you go out for? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and much more than a prophet: he is the one of whom scripture says: Look, I am going to send my messenger before you; he will prepare your way before you. I tell you solemnly, of all the children born of women, a greater than John the Baptist has never been seen; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he is.'



'... the blind see again, and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised to life and the Good News is proclaimed to the poor; and happy is the man who does not lose faith in me.'

The Gospel and You

Today we hear of John's time in prison, which according to tradition, lasted about eighteen months. John must have had a lonely and bitter experience in prison. A man of freedom in the wilderness, now confined to a cramped cell. He longed to see Jesus but had to be content with hearing of his work through those of his followers who had become believers in the Son of Man. He sends some of his disciples with a question: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" John had already proclaimed Jesus at the River Jordan and said he was not worthy to untie the straps of Jesus' sandals.

How does Jesus answer? As so often happens, he does not respond directly to the question but quotes the prophet Isaiah "Go back and tell John what you hear and see: the blind see again, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life and the Good News is preached to the poor." The signs of God's Kingdom already present in our world through the presence of Jesus.

John was strong. He was a man of integrity. A prophet in the true sense of the word. One who could see through all the bluster and bravado of the present and point to a greater reality. In John's case that was the Kingdom of God, available to all who hear the word and change their ways.

Whether on land or sea, our Christian vocation is similar to his. We are called to prepare the way for Jesus to come into our hearts but also to prepare other people's hearts so that they, too, may "experience the joy of salvation", that healing, wholeness and holiness we all long for and which alone gives real meaning to our lives.

On our ship today we light the third candle representing Joy, difficult to find at sea, in the harsh world of shipping. Yet we must believe that despite everything, our three candles of hope, peace and joy point to something which makes our Advent waiting worthwhile.

Fourth Sunday of Advent 22 December 2019

Gospel Matthew 1:18-24

This is how Jesus Christ came to be born. His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph; but before they came to live together she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a man of honour and wanting to spare her publicity, decided to divorce her informally. He had made up his mind to do this when the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because she has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you must name him Jesus, because he is the one who is to save his people from their sins.' Now all this took place to fulfil the words spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and they will call him Emmanuel, a name which means 'God-is-with-us'. When Joseph woke up he did what the angel of the Lord had told him to do: he took his wife to his home.



The Gospel and You

The gospel today seems to have a double focus. On the one hand Jesus is the descendant of Abraham and David and the fulfilment of the Old Testament attached to those great figures. But also it acknowledges that the manner of his birth is most unusual, and the names given to him – Jesus and Emmanuel, suggest that his deeds will far exceed those of his famous ancestors.

For Matthew, those names are important. What can a name tell us about the person who has been given it? I don't think it tells us very much. Names like Colum, Steve or Bryony are useful for distinguishing various members of a family, but they don't say much about the people themselves. A name rarely reveals the personality or life-work of the one who carries it. With some Biblical names it is different. For instance, Abraham meant "Father of a great people"

And for Matthew it is essential to note the child will be called Emmanuel, meaning "God with us". Jesus will be the very presence of God the Father in our world. God is with us and is one of us. And this presence does not end with the Resurrection.

Before Jesus leaves his disciples at the Ascension, his last words (in Matthew's Gospel) are: "I am with you always – to the end of time". Right down to the present, Jesus continues to be Emmanuel for us and that is why we continue to celebrate the birth of Jesus 2,000 years on.

At sea we light our fourth candle which represents Peace. A peace that we hope will come into the lives of so many at Christmas time. At sea there is not much sign of Christmas and crews don't often know where they will be on that great day – probably at sea, but the gifts they have on board given by chaplains in a previous port remind us all that this is a season of love and generosity, indeed – that God is with us.

"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and they will call him Emmanuel, a name which means 'God-is-with-us,'"

Christmas Day

25 December

Gospel Luke 2:15-20

Now when the angels had gone from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us.' So they hurried away and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. When they saw the child they repeated what they had been told about him, and everyone who heard it was astonished at what the shepherds had to say. As for Mary, she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds went back glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen; it was exactly as they had been told.

The Gospel and You

So here we are, on the wonderful feast of Christmas. I know that Easter is the most important feast of the year but try telling that to the millions who will turn up to Church all over the world to celebrate the birth of Our Saviour.

St Luke speaks of the earthy reality of Jesus and his mother. That reality is often hidden behind tinsel and pretty images but the story of Christmas is a pretty harsh one. Perhaps what the shepherds discovered must have seemed at first an anti-climax. Just a man, a mother and a baby lying in a feeding box in a dark and smelly cowshed. Is this what the angels had to sing about?

Whatever was there, the shepherds in their simple faith saw something very special in that scene. Many others must have seen and just passed on. They might have thought or said: "Oh, another poor couple expecting handouts."

The shepherds went back to their fields and flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. They were the first evangelizers. A strange choice as they were regarded as sinful outcasts. Their lifestyle exempted them from Temple worship. But it was to the ordinary, the excluded that the birth of Jesus was first proclaimed, pointing out the direction his ministry would take.

Christmas speaks of being childlike, of wonder, innocence, joy, love, forgiveness, family, community and giving. When we are in touch with these we more easily see what's special in our ordinary life. These make light shine in the darkness.

Like the shepherds we too are asked to watch in the night and we are watching when, in our hearts there is more childlike trust than cynicism, more love than indifference, more forgiveness than bitterness and more focus on others than on ourselves.

And so on our ship, our final candle, a white one in the middle of the wreath telling us that all that was foretold is now real and the saviour is truly amongst us. And from sea we wish you a Christmas Blessing
*May peace and plenty be the first
To lift the latch at your door
And happiness be guided to your home
By the candle of Christmas.*



The Meaning of Advent and Christmas

Advent and Christmas are two of the Church's 'seasons' – a bit like nature's seasons. Another is the season of Lent, which prepares us for the season of Easter.

What is Advent?

Advent means more than preparing for Christmas. It starts each new year for the Christian, a period of waiting and expectancy. The joyful season of advent, (observed for at least 1500 years) starts in late November or early December, and leads us into Christmas in a four week season of preparation.

First part of Advent – looking forward

Curious and apprehensive about when 'the Lord will come again', Christians live in the 'in between' period of their salvation, between the 'two comings' of Christ:

1. When Christ came to Bethlehem giving us the opportunity to receive him in the flesh – celebrated in the last nine days of Advent (a Novena).

2. When Christ will come again to take his Bride, the Church, at the end of time – celebrated in the first part of Advent.

This is the heart and tension of advent, waiting expectantly, in joy and hope, since the risen Christ will be revealed to everyone on the last day. When we think of his Second Coming at the end of the world, gloomy ancient pictures of doom are not appropriate. God's judgement is the ultimate expression of his tender mercy. Advent is a time to face our own end, and to fix our eyes on heaven – however uncomfortable that may seem.

The flavour of Advent

Joy is restrained during Advent – there are no flowers on the altar in church and the vestments are purple (sobriety, not sadness). Such restraint only enhances the happy outburst of joyful white and gold of Christmas. Advent always contains just four Sundays.



Advent calendar, Advent wreath and candles

These are popular, and enhance the sense of waiting, counting the days. Many such calendars miss the point by giving a piece of chocolate or some other present every day. The five candles of the wreath, found in Churches and homes, similarly mark the progress of advent by lighting a new candle on each of the four Sundays and on Christmas day itself.

Second part of Advent – preparing for Christmas

Anyone who keeps Advent carefully will get nearer to the truth about Christmas, and have a happier Christmas than one who simply attends church on Christmas Day. Nine days of prayer (from 17 – 25 December), waiting and meditating on the incarnation, focus our

lives on Christmas itself. In Russia, there is a custom of fasting and silence on Christmas eve until the first star appears (the star which shone above Bethlehem).

Christmas and the 12 days of Christmas

Christmas time, celebrating the nativity and first 'manifestation' of Christ to mankind, lasts until the Epiphany (6 January). December 25 roughly coincides with the winter solstice when the sun begins to rise in its orbit and the long winter nights grow shorter. It was the season of ancient pagan festivals, since transformed by Christianity. Churches and families often have a small crib, depicting the nativity scene to keep in mind the wonder of the Incarnation and the characters involved in it. The Christmas tree reminds us of the eternal life Jesus came to bring since in winter the evergreen fir becomes a sign of undying life.

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The Good Life: Spending Holidays Away From Home

Being a seafarer is all about being away from home. Usually that is ok, we learn to cope. During the Christmas season the pain and pressure can intensify – so what is it like to be away from home at special times and how can you cope?

Reality check

There are many great things about a career at sea, but one of the not so hot issues is having to cope with spending holidays away from home, family and friends. Especially when they are all celebrating special occasions or festivals.



Whether it is Christmas or Diwali, Ramadan or Thanksgiving, there will be celebrations, special times and things going on back at home that seafarers will feel disconnected from.

Being Away At Christmas

Sadly being away at such times can really magnify the sense of isolation and disconnect. There can be feelings of sadness, resentment, perhaps even anger. These can have a bad effect at sea, and so it is important to consider what can be done to lessen the effect.

Keeping a brave face is one way of coping – but really, that stiff upper lip isn't going to lessen the effect inside. So just how do people at sea cope and stay relatively happy away from family, when the rest of the world is partying, celebrating or spending holy times of reflection?

Spending holidays away? Here is what you can do!

So as we know, separation from family and friends during the holidays is difficult. While nothing can fill the void of missing family members, there are a few things you can do to make the separation easier for all of you. Remember the separation is temporary and treat it as such. Eventually you will be reunited...the calendar will flick its pages, the clock will tick, so remember you will be home again before too long.

Time Will Pass

Here are some things you can do to ease the loneliness and sadness.

- 1) **Try to keep some traditions:** Doing things as you normally would is comforting. It may not always be practical at sea, but trying to do something special to mark the occasion can help ease the pain.
- 2) **Invite crewmates to help you decorate or to share a means of celebrating:** Usually, even in multicultural crews there will be others sharing the same sense of sadness and longing. So work together to banish the missing, it's good to talk or to do some activities which can make you feel closer to home.
- 3) **Take time Out:** You may not be able to have time off duty or watch, but perhaps even finding a little time to do something special to mark the occasion can help. A few minutes out of your normal schedule to either enjoy a new activity, chat or to reflect can be powerful enough to help.
- 4) **Call your family, email or send a video card to loved ones.** Connected ships with internet are great, and allow seafarers to communicate. Onboard such vessels this is easier – for others, not so. But you can perhaps schedule a call or save some cash to even spend just a few minutes to chat with those at home. Remember,

they will be just as excited to hear from you as you are to speak to them.

- 5) **Journal your feelings.** Share your journal when you get home. It has been proven that writing can ease stress and upset. So take some time out to write about your feelings, perhaps holidays of the past, or of what you are looking forward to doing in the future.
- 6) **Music soothes the savage beast.** It's not just writing that can be cathartic – any form of art or pursuit can help. So why not make a music playlist for each of your friends, or for the party you will have when you get home. Perhaps you can practice with Photoshop and create some works of art from the pictures of your latest trip.
- 7) **Surround yourself with pictures of family and friends.** With so many seafarers having smart phones, tablets and laptops – even if you cannot get online, there will be many photos on your device. Taking some time out to look through them, perhaps looking at them more closely, remembering when they were taken and the feelings they brought.
- 8) **Sleep:** Yes it may sound boring, but treating yourself to the luxury of a little extra sleep may be useful. It has the added effect of helping make the time go faster, and makes you feel better. Work time notwithstanding, it can be a really luxurious thing to take the time to nap.

Missing Those Away From Home

If can perhaps be all too easy to focus on the person away – but those left at home can suffer too. It isn't always possible to maintain the "holiday spirit" when a big part of it is bouncing around on the ocean, far from home.

For that reason it is important for people left at home to try and fill the void. They should try and focus on enjoying the time, but remembering too. Documenting the event with photos and video can be a great way to mark the occasion.

To take the pressure off a little, it can be good to plan a re-run – so a special "home coming" version of the big day. Perhaps a meal planned and as many friends booked to attend as possible.

Following these tips won't bring your loved one home any sooner, but they can make the separation easier. You will bring a smile to your loved one's face and remind them how much you love and miss them through this difficult time.

The original version of this article was first published on www.crewtoo.com.

Missing family? They miss you too!



A Christmas Prayer

by Robert Louis Stevenson



Loving Father,
Help us remember the birth of Jesus,
that we may share in the song of the angels,
the gladness of the shepherds,
and worship of the wise men.

Close the door of hate
and open the door of love all over the world.
Let kindness come with every gift
and good desires with every greeting.
Deliver us from evil by the blessing
which Christ brings,
and teach us to be merry with clear hearts.

May the Christmas morning
make us happy to be thy children,
and Christmas evening bring us to our beds
with grateful thoughts,
forgiving and forgiven,
for Jesus' sake.

Amen.



**Apostleship
of the Sea**

Supporting Seafarers Worldwide

