

DISCIPLINE

A retired Naval officer, when discussing the survival of HMNZS Manawanui's crew, initially used the word 'miraculous', but then tempered this by saying that it was all down to good discipline.

In this self-centered century, the word has acquired negative connotations, implying top-down force, even autocracy.

But it shares a Latin root with our familiar word 'discipleship'. And what does that mean?

A random visit to the Gospels found Matthew 18, and 19. The discipleship model on show there is one of teaching, and of (possibly limited) understanding, as Jesus struggles to get the Twelve to focus on His and their mission.

But that relationship was far more than a travelling tutorial. In those politically unstable times, a group of twelve adult men would have been able to travel in greater safety. The disciples had been chosen for their varied skills, and they act sometimes as agents, enablers, and occasional protectors.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary offers 2 relevant alternative definitions of discipline; mental moral or physical training, or a branch of instruction or learning. So Jesus is instilling discipline in His disciples.

And we might suggest here that an efficient ship's company are in that sense disciples in the midst of their discipline. We would expect to find clear communication from the captain and officers, but also clear understanding of what is necessary for a disciplined (and therefore survivable) evacuation. For example, there would be a shared plan, involving for instance the weaker swimmers being placed in the safest liferafts. Everyone would be looking out for their shipmates. There would be a shared vision, and a set of shared values. Trust – essential on a ship – would go both up to the leaders as well as down to the led. So we have no need to fear the word 'discipline'. In fact, we exercise it every Sunday in the formality of our worship, in the precision of our singing, in the dress code of our sanctuary team. Our worship model only works because we put the congregation's needs before our own.

There will of course have to be a Naval Court of Inquiry into the ship's loss. There are always lessons to be learned.

In the meantime though we can thank God both for the survival of her crew, and for the gift of discipline.

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