



Down by the ocean

Hugo McBride

I grew up at the ocean, at that point where the wild North Atlantic surges down between Scotland and Ireland and is further squeezed between Rathlin Island and Fair Head. My earliest excursions outside the house were pram rides along the coast road, then walks and scrambles over rocks and paddles in tidal pools before finally plunging into the depths and feeling the magic of its buoyancy and power and some God-given immunity to the icy coldness. And the late evenings fishing at the pier where the mackerel drew me like a magnet and the pride of the catch as I walked up the Quay Road with our supper dangling on a string. It was there too that I hit my first golf shots on the fairway running down the side of the beach and watched the wind from the ocean gently nudge my errant ball back to safety. It was there too that I made my first fumbling ventures out of self and into adolescent relationships and romance. Is it any wonder that I still want to go down to the sea in my declining years in search of solace?

I am a long way from Ballycastle now, but still the ocean draws me, if not to the waters of my childhood at least to the warm calming stretches of the Indian Ocean. The sea calls me home in a way I cannot articulate: I am far from home and yet I am at home. I feel rooted and at peace here on the eastern seaboard of KwaZulu-Natal, just as I do in North Antrim. I feel

that I belong, though nothing belongs to me. I feel part of the community though my language and contribution is inadequate: it is something that has been given, not earned. I am a stranger seeking acceptance despite all that has happened and the history of oppression inflicted upon the people by my race and my civilization. And maybe the miracle is that so many reach out and bid me welcome, offer friendship, even love. Rapport happens and some quantum of faith trickles between us.

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” I wonder about people who speak so dogmatically about things, about God laying down the law about all sorts of things great and small. In my experience, God plays the cards close to the chest. Sometimes I just cannot get a handle on God, cannot visualise or catch a concept of the One I am supposed to serve. Yet something happens at the ocean that I do not notice much elsewhere, something like a murmur or a glimpse, an echo in the crash of the waves or a flash as a dolphin or marlin suddenly erupts from the water and twists high into the air, or the way the evening light colours the clouds and the surface. And I sense a presence, ‘a rumour of angels’, a whisper of hope, and I too ‘hear it in the deep heart’s core’. It is what keeps me going as my energy dwindles. ■

Fr Hugo McBride was ordained in 1966. He worked in Nigeria and has worked in South Africa since 1994.

(Image: Durban by Ra N from Pixabay)