

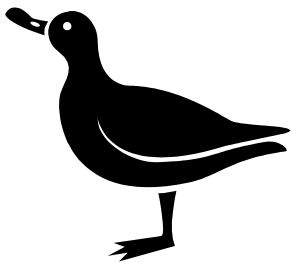
## Water, water, everywhere ... but not a drop to drink!

The water crisis facing the world today reminds me of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 625-line ballad, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. In it, Coleridge relates the supernatural events experienced by a mariner on a long sea voyage.

The mariner stops a man who is on his way to a wedding ceremony, and begins to recite his story. The wedding guest's reaction turns from impatience to bemusement and fascination as the mariner's story progresses.



The mariner's tale begins with his ship leaving harbour. Despite initial good fortune, the ship is driven off course by a storm and, driven south, eventually reaches Antarctica.



An albatross, traditionally a good omen, appears and leads them out of the threatening land of ice. Even as the ship's crew praises the albatross, the mariner shoots it with a crossbow, for reasons unknown.

This crime arouses the wrath of supernatural spirits who then pursue the ship. The south wind, which had initially led them from the land of ice now sends the ship into uncharted waters, where it is becalmed.

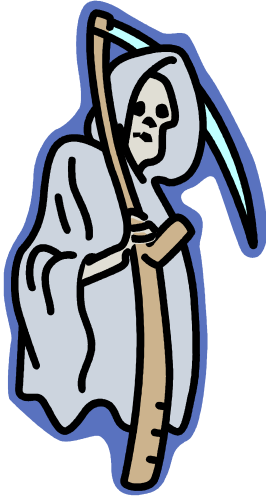
In Coleridge's own words:

*Day after day, day after day,  
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;  
As idle as a painted ship  
Upon a painted ocean.*

*Water, water, everywhere,  
And all the boards did shrink;  
Water, water, everywhere,  
Nor any drop to drink.*



Tormented by thirst, the other members of the crew hang the albatross around the mariner's neck as a sign of his guilt.



Eventually, in an eerie passage, the ship encounters a ghostly vessel. Onboard are DEATH (a skeleton) and the “Night-Mair” LIFE-IN-DEATH (a pale, deathly-fair woman), who are playing dice for the souls of the crew.

With a roll of the dice, Death wins the lives of the crewmembers and Life-in-death the life of the mariner, a prize she considers more valuable.

Her name is a clue as to the mariner's fate; he will endure a fate worse than death as punishment for his killing of the albatross.

One by one all two hundred crew members die, but the Mariner lives on, seeing for seven days and nights the curse in the eyes of the crew's corpses, whose last expressions remain upon their faces.

Eventually, the Mariner's curse is lifted when he sees sea creatures swimming in the water. Despite his cursing them as “slimy things” earlier in the poem, he suddenly sees their true beauty and blesses them (a spring of love gush'd from my heart and I bless'd them unaware).



Suddenly, as he manages to pray, the albatross falls from his neck and his guilt is partially expiated. The bodies of the crew, possessed by good spirits, rise again and steer the ship back home, where it sinks in a whirlpool, leaving only the Mariner behind.

In penance for his deed, the Mariner is forced to wander the earth and tell his story, and teach a lesson to those he meets:



*He prayeth best, who loveth best  
All things both great and small;  
For the dear God who loveth us,  
He made and loveth all.*

Like the wedding guest in Coleridge's *Rime*, our reaction to the water crisis looming over us turns from impatience to bemusement and on to fascination. Like a ship that has left the safety of harbour, the survival of planet earth depends on the seamanship of our mariners. But like the ancient mariner, we keep shooting at the very albatross that will lead us out of threatening seas, even as others in the ship's crew praise it. And so we are becalmed. Condemned to see our crew die around us, with curses in their eyes. And like the Ancient Mariner, we are left wanderers on earth, with the mark of Cain, doomed to walk the earth alone and alienated from all others.

Sadly, for me, the joy of every day life is increasingly being tempered with the knowledge of the lurking danger of climate change. Like Coleridge's themes of guilt and remorse, juxtaposed with the background joy of a wedding feast, we the audience are unwilling, but forced to hear the tale anyway.



There will be water, water everywhere, but not a drop to drink!

Fr Michael. May 2006