



**Address by
President of Iceland
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
at a memorial gathering
for mariners lost at sea**

**Hafnarfjörður Church
11 February 2024**

Bishop of Iceland, Madame Ambassador and diplomats,
dear friends, at this moment of heartfelt remembrance.

I want to thank you all for being here today. In this way we honour the memory of those who went to a watery grave 65 years ago – those who sailed out of harbour aboard four vessels, from three countries, but were not to make it home again. A total of 153 lives were lost, each one a tragedy to a family.

We Icelanders are pleased and grateful that loss of life at sea has declined so much off our shores. Whole years even pass without a single death at sea. We are, of course, conscious of the perils that may lie in wait, that can cause such destruction and pain. Just last week the fishing vessel *Kambur* foundered off the Faroe Islands. Fourteen people were rescued, but two are missing. And now our thoughts are with our kinfolk in the Faroes, just as they feel for us and offer a helping hand in our times of need.

We must also know our history. We must truly grasp the value of the lives of those who brought in the catches over the centuries, carrying out their work for the benefit of themselves and others. No doubt the crew of the side-trawler *Júli* were hoping for good hauls when they set out on a fishing trip in early 1959. And their efforts would also clearly contribute to society as a whole. From the early 20th century, progress and enhanced quality of life in Iceland were largely a function of technological advances in the fisheries: mechanisation, larger vessels, modern factories and fish-processing plants, new knowledge of diverse kinds.

And, gradually, safety at sea also improved. Lighthouses were built, and light buoys were placed around the coast. These required service and maintenance, provided by the lightship *Hermóður*. In addition to their routine duties, the ship's crew also played a part in patrolling Iceland's territorial waters. The crew were united, and the *esprit de corps* was good. I know this almost at first hand, because my grandfather was master of the *Hermóður* – he was off duty when the ship went down.

The crew of the *Blue Wave*, a Canadian trawler also lost in early 1959, must have thought just the same way as the men aboard the *Júli*. At this moment of remembrance, we also commemorate those who embarked on their doomed voyage from Greenland on a brand-new passenger vessel, *Hans Hedtoft*. The ocean passage was supposed to be safe and easy – but far from it.

Why did these losses happen? Why did such dreadful events take place at sea? We know about wild weather and appalling ice accretion. We know about icebergs, we know about heavy seas and breakers that batter ships. All that knowledge has helped us to reduce the incidence of accidents and loss of life, and it is still helping. Thus we learn by experience – bitter experience – and strive to prevent further losses.

But we also ask more profound questions, about higher powers and lives that are lost. Religious faith can be a solace – the belief that, though God moves in mysterious ways, we may believe that everything has a purpose and, no less importantly, that we will ultimately be reunited with our loved ones in a better place. In this way people may seek to deal with their grief – a deep grief, which so many experienced after the loss of the four ships 65 years ago.

Here in Iceland many people lost a father or a son, a spouse or sweetheart – many who had to do their best to cope with that trauma for the rest of their lives. In such a situation, a feeling of empathy makes a big difference. At this commemorative gathering here in Hafnarfjörður Church we honour the memory of those whose lives were taken by the ocean, while also expressing our sympathy for those who lost their loved ones. And we give thanks that we have succeeded in improving the safety of mariners, though we must always remain on the alert.

Finally, I would like to thank those who took the initiative in holding this memorial gathering, and the exhibition here in the parish hall about the terrible losses at sea in early 1959. This is truly a most praiseworthy, and beautiful, undertaking.

Dear friends: Let us honour the memory of the 95 people who died aboard the *Hans Hedtoft*, the 16 on the *Blue Wave*, the 30 lost on the *Júli* and the 12 on the *Hermóður*. A blessing on the memory of them all.