

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> April 2022

Easter Day

The Titanic was supposed to be the greatest ship that had ever been constructed by man. She was 883 feet long; she had sixteen water tight compartments and she was considered to be such a marvel of engineering that she was unsinkable. The London Times came out and declared it to be so.

And as she prepared for her maiden voyage from Southampton a hundred and ten years ago this week, there was every reason to believe that the journey would be the pinnacle of success for the White Star Line. She was captained by a man of forty years' experience with the sea, and of course, we know what happened when late on the 15<sup>th</sup> April 1912, she collided with the iceberg in the North Atlantic and sank two hours later with the loss of over 1,500 passengers and crew.

And the history of the Titanic – the myth, the drama, the pathos, the tragedy, the humanity – have never lost their hold on the popular imagination. The Titanic has fascinated us through the years.

The ship has inspired us; enraged us; made us think and ponder, and see connections with our own lives, and life in general, and the life of the world. And its meaning.

Think of the books and the films that have been produced, and in my humble opinion, the 1958 British film, *A Night to Remember*, starring Kenneth More as Second Officer Lightoller remains the best of the Titanic films, even, in my eyes, beating, James Cameron's epic of 1997.

The Sunday right after the disaster, the Bishop of Winchester preached in St Mary's Church in Southampton, and spoke about the lessons that could be drawn from the enormous tragedy.

“When,” the Bishop asked the crowded congregation, “has such a mighty lesson about our confidence and trust in power, machinery, and money been shot through the nation?” Then, prophetically he added, “The Titanic, name and thing, will stand as a monument and warning to human presumption.”

The fatal danger of pride, hubris, that's the lesson usually drawn from the sinking of the Titanic. “God Himself could not sink this ship” one of the crew is said to have exclaimed, shortly before the voyage began.

Famous and tragic last words.

History is littered by words like these – words of over confidence and arrogance and puffed up pride which pretend to have everything worked out; which claim to have instituted the perfect human system, which no powers of heaven or earth could even challenge.

That in one of the lessons the sad story of the Titanic teaches – pay attention to the warnings; pay attention to that which you don't see; don't always trust the so called experts; think for yourself; question authority.

Secondly, the Titanic reminds us TO PAY ATTENTION TO HOW WE ARE ACTING, because someone might be watching – or even if no particular person is, then history might be. The epic of the Titanic offers the whole panoply of human life – from the best to the worst – think of the dedication and commitment of Rosalie and Isidore Strauss, the wealthy couple who decided not to be parted but to go down together; or the dignity of Benjamin Guggenheim, one of the richest men on board – he and his valet changed into evening attired for the occasion. “We have dressed in our best,” Guggenheim said, “and we are prepared to go down like gentlemen.”; or the leader of the orchestra, Wallace Hartley, who, along with his fellow band members, including young violinist, Jock Hume from Dumfries, continued to play until the very end and whose body was recovered two weeks later, his violin strapped to his outer coat.

We remember both the heroes and the villains, and we choose, in all that we do, which side of the line on which we stand.

And perhaps the greatest tragedy of the Titanic, of course, was the MATTER OF THE LIFEBOATS. There just weren't enough to save everyone – at most, just over half of those on board could be saved; as it turned out, of 2,200 passengers and crew, just over 700 were rescued.

Then there was the unfair class distinctions that were made to determine who was allowed into the lifeboats. Whether deliberate or not, there were twice as many first class men allowed into the boats as third class children.

Of 29 first and second class children, all except one were saved.

Of 76 third class children, only 23 were saved.

There were only 4 deaths out of 143 first class women, and three of those were by choice, wives who chose to remain with their husbands.

15 of 93 second class women lost their lives, compared to 81 of 179 third class women.

If you were down in steerage, apparently, you were considered not as important, more “expendable” than those on the higher decks. And you paid for this distinction with your life.

Could such a tragedy happen in our own day?

Do such distinctions of class, of money, and position and prestige, still determine who is to be saved, and who is to founder?

I am not sure – but perhaps so.

To the extent that such attitudes still prevail among us in today's world, then we have not learned the lessons from Titanic, and that is perhaps the greatest tragedy.

As the theologian Richard Holloway has written, "We only have one planet to share and we will all sink or survive together or not at all. The privatised first class cabins at the top are only as safe as the steerage cabins on the lower decks."

Remembering the sinking of the Titanic can become a parable for us, even as we face this greatest journey in the story of our human race, the very choice of the survival or demise of the human race on planet earth.

Will we choose a life boat ethic, with the privileged few in the life boats and the masses going down with the ship and perishing?

Or will we choose a more just and human ethic in which all of us – first, second and third class alike – passengers all together on the same ship?

Those at the top may delude themselves that what happens down below is no concern of theirs, and that is very evident in our society today.

But there are others who realise that the survival of all depends on everyone working together to patch up the leaks, to mend the quarrels, to save the ship of state.

To save it, we must learn to share our resources, to protect our environment, to curb our selfishness and learn tolerance and mutual respect for one another.

The RMS Titanic and its sinking was a key moment in history – it changed marine specifications and nautical discipline; it is one of a number of emblematic turning points of that period; and, as has often been said, it tilted the world on its axis.

The sinking of this magnificent ocean liner was a tragedy, which like all disasters communal, national, international or personal draws us, in human terms, close to our own vulnerability, and the tragedies and fears and griefs which we ourselves experience.

These draw us to the grief that Jesus carried in His life, on His way to the Cross, and His own suffering which we so often look to as we ourselves suffer in our search for His solidarity and assurance and peace.

Here we are on Easter Sunday, and I am only too conscious that today and throughout the year, and in the midst of all of life, that any of us may end up in the middle and muddle of journeys which are demanding and painful and at times, unbearable.

Times when we feel swamped by circumstance, engulfed by the waves of grief and sorrow and despair.

One of the characters for whom I have such a huge sympathy was the disciple Thomas, the guy who had a very hard time accepting Christ's Resurrection from the dead. His very name

is synonymous with scepticism. His Master was gone; dead; and all his dreams vanished overnight.

I suppose that we are all like Thomas at some time or other. Times when we have our doubts, our questions. Times when we find faith coming very hard. You are in good company here. Mother Theresa herself was plagued by doubts all her life.

Was Jesus raised from the darkness of the tomb?

Is there really life after death?

But I would say to you today – there is benefit and blessing in honest doubt. That is what Thomas himself found.

Thomas heard from the others about the Resurrection of Jesus, but it wasn't till a week later when the disciples were all together in the upper room that he experienced the Risen Christ for himself.

Through the darkness of doubt to faith and reassurance.

And we know how the story continued – the ultimate, but not immediate new found energy of those disciples, lives mingled with achievement, disappointment, failure and tragedy;

So as we move into the Easter season and continue to celebrate that event which tilted the entire cosmos on its axis, an event greater than any titanic event in human history, we find that we are close to the bone of our own human vulnerability – joys and sorrows – Holy Weeks and Easters – crucifixions and resurrections.

What gives us confidence is not only that we journey with each other, supporting one another, but again and again, the Suffering Jesus, the Risen Christ, comes to us as He did to Thomas.

For Thomas, that Sunday evening after Easter was a night to remember indeed, a night when his doubts dissipated and faith came that God was indeed in control, He was at the helm, and despite the setbacks, the storms and the trials of the journey, the destination was sure.

The Revd Fraser R Aitken, Locum Minister