

Sermons, Speeches & Addresses

Titanic Memorial Service Address
15 April 2012



The long service corridor on E Deck that was used by the crew was called "Scotland Road" as so many of them came from that part of Liverpool. The city was also home to the Captain – John Edward Smith – and to the Chairman of the White Star Line, J. Bruce Ismay who lived in Mossley Hill. The last time they left Liverpool to set sail for New York from Southampton this Cathedral was ten years in to the seventy years it took to build it. As that great ship – then the largest in the world – sank so the foundations of this great nave were being laid - the largest Anglican Cathedral in the world.

Both the Titanic and the Cathedral are monuments to the lives of Liverpoolians. Today we commemorate the one in the nave of the other – both of them monuments to the life and lives of Liverpool.

In the 107th Psalm we learn of the destiny of those *"that go down to the sea in ships: and occupy their business in great waters"*. Sailors know only too well of *"the strong wind (that) ariseth which lifteth up the waves thereof. They are carried up to the heaven, and down again to the deep: their soul melteth away because of the trouble. They reel to and fro ... and are at their wits end."*

These words from the Bible are more vivid than a film script. They tell us of the terror of the seas and their power to snatch away life.

The families of those that go down to the sea in ships are well acquainted with that terror and with grief. Families that have to live without fathers for long periods and some through tragedy forever. We remember them today – those who suffered grievous loss through the Titanic tragedy and indeed all those in this city and all maritime cities who through the long years of their maritime history have endured the grief of losing their loved ones at sea.

The Titanic like every ocean liner is a microcosm of life itself. The elements on the journey are unpredictable, there is hubris and nemesis, there's division between the crew and the passengers and division among the passengers according to class and wealth. In time of crisis there's selfishness and sacrifice, cowardice and courage, there is both fatalism and faith.

I remember when the nation was deeply troubled by the Zeebrugge ferry disaster. The Herald of Free Enterprise capsized in the harbour drowning some 200 crew and passengers. One crew member was interviewed afterwards. He was due to be on board but at the last minute his roster was changed. Explaining his good fortune, he said, *"I guess God was on my side."* You could understand his relief but it raised a disturbing question *"Where was God for those who died?"*

On this the Sunday after Easter we have a Christian insight into the whereabouts of God on that fateful day and on April 15th 1912 when in the early hours the Titanic sank.

God shows us through his dying Son, Jesus Christ, that he was with those that drowned. As Jesus said, *"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny yet not one of them falls to the ground without your Father. And are you not more valuable than they?"*

Five days after the tragedy the Daily Mirror carried on its front page in full the sheet music and words of the hymn 'Nearer, my God, to thee' with the byline 'Band men heroes play 'Nearer, my God, to thee' as the Titanic goes down to its doom.'

The horror of that disaster is unimaginable even in a city like Liverpool that tragically is no stranger to tragedy. But what we hold dear in this service is that as they died it was God himself who was drawing nearer to them, calling them by name, embracing their agony, drowning in their tears and lying with them in their watery grave.

As William Blake that great English poet and mystic intoned in his poem "On Another's Sorrow":

*Think not thou canst sigh a sigh,
And thy Maker is not by:
Think not thou canst weep a tear,
And thy Maker is not near.*

*Oh He gives to us his joy,
That our grief He may destroy:
Till our grief is fled and gone
He doth sit by us and moan.*

But the Dawn of Easter also reminds us that death is not the end – spring follows winter with new life. The eternal love of God holds the souls of the departed for eternity and defeats death forever.

But just as the Risen Lord's body bore the marks of his wounds so the City's present is always mindful of the sacrifices of the past – not daunted nor defeated but determined for its children and its children's children – be they on Scotland Road or Queens Drive to give them a future that honours the past and heralds a better world. All of us on a journey that takes us inexorably nearer and nearer to the city God.

May the vision of that heavenly city fill us with hope and give comfort to this and all maritime cities. Amen.