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Titanic lesson: More sorrow than sin in the world

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Bulletins from the Human Side

We gaze together at the seas long smoothed over at the place where the RMS Titanic went down a century ago. Like the psalmist who sang "Out of the depths I have cried unto you, O Lord," so the Titanic still cries out to us from the depths of the iceberg-crowned waters, a thousand and more voices speaking to us of the wounds of loss that a hundred years of solitude on the sandy floor of the Atlantic have not healed.

Water is the medium of true Mystery, carrying to us the voices of the lost passengers from the wreckage strewn like the pearls spilled out of a dowager's purse across what the marine investigators term the "debris field" of the great vessel.

Even as collectors try to scoop them up, these objects testify that this is not debris but rather a human field. These little fittings of ordinary life — razors and combs, pens and buckles and brooches — whisper of their owners, bringing them to life so that we stand on the deck next to them, knowing what they do not of the destiny that will suddenly engulf them along with plans and dreams not far different from our own.

We can feel the currents of sorrow that run as deeply through these waters as the Gulf Stream does, not many miles away. What do we remember of these passengers — their sins or their sorrows? How, in this same month of April, can we not also hear again, with reports of some of their remains being interred in the same sea, the voices of those who went down with the Twin Towers?

And what do they tell us, in their final phone calls and emails to those they loved, if not of the simple goodness of people that preachers mistakenly call sinners and we mistakenly call ordinary? The pain of the 9/11 victims seems fresher than that of the Titanic victims; yet, sadness bears no time stamp or expiration date, and they now intermingle, testifying together to the bonds of human love and the sadness that is sown like wheat into the field of passing time.

Now that they have broken free of time and entered eternity, we can see and understand them better. We catch glimpses of the purity of heart that, despite the rolling thunder of sermons indicting men and women for sinfulness, they seem to so simply and unselfconsciously possess.

What are we to learn in this Easter season in which, during the ash-filled weeks of Lent, we were told by earnest preachers of the enormous debt of sin that Jesus paid off by dying for us? How great our sinfulness, they claim, that such a price was exacted for us.

But perhaps that is an economic understanding of redemption prepared by bookkeepers who, if you ask them how the day is going, will tell you if the stock market is up or down. Did Jesus, we may ask as the full light of spring rises, die to pay for our sins, or to identify with our sorrows? He is called the Man of Sorrows, so perhaps this deeper understanding has been hidden in plain sight, as the simple mysteries of love and devotion are, all around us.

Jesus forgave sinners readily but spent much of his time on earth responding to the pain and sorrow that are the condition of our living in time.

We are all gathered this week where the latitude and longitude inscribe a cross on the surface of the waters in whose depths the broken Titanic lies. Its telegrapher, it is said, sent out messages until the last moment. Perhaps, however, we can hear these signals from these depths to our own depths, telling us that beneath us lies a place of judgment where the blessed were ushered into eternity because they were so busy bearing the sorrows of life that go with loving that they had hardly any time for sinning at all.

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