

# Against Our Better Judgment

Matthew 5: 38-48; 16:21-28

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent

27 March 2011

On our quick trip to London, England, last week, Evelyn and I managed to visit the *Titanic* Exhibition at the O<sub>2</sub> Arena in Greenwich. This is an all-new display of many artefacts that have been recovered from the *RMS Titanic* since Robert Ballard's original discovery of the wreck in the mid- 1980s.

It is quite fascinating to look at the various objects that were aboard the ill-fated *Titanic* when it struck an ice-berg and sank some 400 miles south of Newfoundland on April 15, 1912, with the loss of over 1500 lives. Indeed, there's a sense of poignancy when you think that the crew and people aboard that ship were using many of these items just minutes prior to the tragedy taking place.

There's the ship's telegraph that was used to convey orders from the bridge to the engine room as well as the bell that was used to sound the alarm when the command was given to abandon ship. Pots and pans from the ship's kitchen are on display as well as rows and rows of dishes that had fallen right to the seabed in the same formation as they had been stacked in the vessel's cupboards. Half-drunk champagne bottles with the corks still in them had survived and the champagne is still in drinkable condition. There was music that the band had been playing as well as some of the original instruments.

There were clothes that had been worn by some of the passengers, boots that had come off in the rush to get to the lifeboats. There were playing cards, a leather cigarette case, a handkerchief and even postcards bought in London and Paris that somehow had survived 80 years at the bottom of the ocean. One display contained a satchel of perfume samples that a businessman was taking to the U.S. to expand his sales and you could even smell the perfumes which were still in as good condition as they were back then. It is an amazing exhibition that gives you a sense of the individuals involved, tells you quite a bit about their life stories and makes you feel that the events of almost 100 years ago are not that far away after all.<sup>1</sup>

Since the *Titanic* went down, there has been, of course, an ongoing debate about why this ship –which, at the time, represented the very latest in maritime technology and was hailed as unsinkable – met with seemingly avoidable disaster. Fingers have been pointed at the construction of the ship, alleging that steel plates and the rivets on the hull were of a composition that allowed the metal to become too brittle at very cold temperatures, making them extremely vulnerable to impact. Others have blamed excessive speed ordered by

the captain to accomplish a very quick Atlantic crossing on the first voyage. Blame has also been laid on a very small oversight: the lack of a simple pair of binoculars that would have allowed the look-out crew members to see the icebergs sooner. Yet others have alleged that warnings of icebergs from other ships in the area were ignored.

Now, an interesting new theory has been put forward by Louise Patten, the grand-daughter of the *Titanic's* second-officer, who believes the real cause of the sinking was an error made by the crew member who was at the helm that night. When the *Titanic* was sighted, the order was given to turn the ship to port or to the left away from the hazard. But Robert Hitchens, the steersman, had been originally trained on a different steering system which, in the heat of the moment, caused him to turn the wheel the wrong way. If only he had been able to resist what came naturally to him, what automatically seemed the right thing to do, Patten says, then disaster might have been averted.<sup>2</sup>

What Hitchens needed to do is what psychologists nowadays call counter-intuitive thinking. Doing the reverse of what common sense tells us to do. Resisting our instincts and, instead, doing what seems strange and unnatural.

That's what pilots have to do when flying a plane. Resist the temptation to do follow their natural instincts and trust the plane's instruments. It's all very well if you are flying in broad daylight in perfect weather conditions. But in darkness or in cloud or fog, a pilot needs to be able to ignore visual data and rely solely on the plane's technology – or on the messages received from the airport tower, that is, of course, assuming the air traffic controller on duty has not fallen asleep!

This, of course, is what killed John F. Kennedy Jr. back in 1999 when he was piloting his plane on a flight to Martha's Vineyard. The National Transportation Safety Board said in its report that Kennedy was not qualified to fly a plane by instruments alone. The crash was, therefore, caused by "Kennedy's failure to maintain control of the airplane during a descent over water at night, which was a result of spatial disorientation."<sup>3</sup> Ah, if only, this young man had been able to do what his father, President Kennedy, showed a great aptitude for, in his handling of matters of international diplomacy, especially with respect to Cuba in 1962. If only he had displayed his father's skill at counterintuitive thinking, he might well have been able to survive that fatal plane crash.

Time and again, in the Gospels, Jesus calls on us as

Christians to be counterintuitive thinkers. To go against our deeply held beliefs and practices the world has taught us and follow his teaching. In the Sermon on the Mount, he constantly prefaces his statements with the words, "You have heard it said," then follows up with, "but I say to you." You have heard it said that it is right to take revenge, but I tell you: Turn the other cheek. You have heard it said only help as much as is required, but I tell you: Go the second mile. You have heard you only need to love your friends, but I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for them. Time and again, Jesus tells us to counter our natural inclinations and instead act according to his higher law. The law of love.<sup>4</sup>

Nowhere, of course, does Jesus more emphatically challenge us to be counterintuitive thinkers than when we face the sacrificial aspects of the Gospel and consider what his cross means for our lives today. Normal thinking would say to look after Number One, advance our own interests wherever possible, put personal safety first and avoid danger at all costs. But Jesus says if we would go with him to Calvary and share his cross, we must be willing to put our worldly priorities to the side. We must do the very reverse of what comes naturally and be willing to embrace risk for the cause of Christ. "If any want to become my followers," he says, "let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."<sup>5</sup>

A recently released independent film, entitled *Heaven's Rain*, tells the true story of Brooks Douglass, the son of a Southern Baptist missionaries who survived the home invasion of his parents in 1979 in Oklahoma City. In October of that year, two drifters burst into the home of his father, Richard Douglass, who was then pastor of the 3,000 member Putnam City Baptist Church. They bound the pastor and his wife along with their 16 year old son, Brooks, and forced them to witness the brutalisation of their 12 year old daughter, Leslie. The young criminals then shot the family and left them for dead. The parents died at the scene but the son and daughter managed to survive.

In following years, Brooks Douglass pursued a career as a state politician and was elected to the Oklahoma senate in 1990 where he proceeded to pioneer legislation to protect and improve victims' rights. But, though he has been highly successful, he admits that he really was profoundly unhappy and, only in recent years, has he realised how much anger he has been carrying around. The only way he could find release, he discovered, was to do what seemed so much the very opposite of what common sense told him he should do and that was to forgive the violent young criminals who had wreaked havoc on his family.

"Christians talk about forgiveness," Douglass said,

"but most people don't really understand what it means. You hear it in church a lot, but when you really get down to the nitty-gritty, I don't think we see that much of it in practice. Although we talk about it, I think forgiveness seems hard, painful. It's something that we don't want to do. I think it's contrary to most of our nature. It's certainly contrary to mine."<sup>6</sup>

Being a Christian is not easy because so often we have to go against what would seem to be normal ways of thinking and behaving. We have to act in ways that are contrary to good common sense. We have to steer a course that seems to be the opposite of the way human nature tells us to go. We have to fly by our instruments, so to speak, and not by sight. And all because Christ so often calls us to act in counterintuitive ways that contradict our better judgement.

Of course, it's difficult to do this. Being a Christian is not easy at the best of times. But, then, just think of the satisfaction we get when we know that we have done the right thing rather than the easy thing. Think how good it is to know we have followed the way of the cross rather than the way of the world. And, most of all, think how wonderful we feel when we hear the voice of the Master whispering in our ear, "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter in the joy of your Lord."<sup>7</sup>

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St. Paul's Presbyterian Church

Peterborough, Ontario

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<sup>1</sup> "Titanic Exhibition Arrives at The O2", <http://blog.visitlondon.com/2010/11/titanic-exhibition-arrives-at-the-o2/>

<sup>2</sup> Mike Collet-White "Titanic sunk by steering mistake, author says", <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/09/22/us-britain-titanic-book-idUSTRE68L1HG20100922>

<sup>3</sup> John F. Kennedy Jr. Source: Wikipedia [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_F\\_Kennedy\\_Jr](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_F_Kennedy_Jr)

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 5:38-48

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 16:22-28

<sup>6</sup> Bob Allen, "Heaven's Rain tells true story of sin, pain and forgiveness", Associated Baptist Press, <http://www.baptiststandard.com/index.php>

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 25:23