

## Lent 2    2.25.24

A week ago Thursday, I was invited to accompany our 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade students to the Titanic Artifact Museum in Orlando. In case you were wondering, our students were on their best behavior and knew every answer about the Titanic when questioned by our guide. I was delighted to be with them and proud of how they acted and proud of what they knew.

When you enter the museum, you are given the boarding pass of one of the passengers. The boarding pass tells you a little about one of the passengers aboard the ship and what class they were traveling in. The boarding pass I received was for a young man traveling in 3<sup>rd</sup> class. A few of the students around me shared their grim assessment about my passenger. "Father, of the 2,240 passengers and crew on board the Titanic, only 706 survived. And, of the 709 3<sup>rd</sup> class passengers on board, only 174 survived. Your odds of getting off the ship alive, Father, aren't good."

Deep sigh.

Despite that grim news, the visit to the museum gave me the opportunity to share with the teacher of those students a heartening and heroic story. He, in turn, shared it with his students.

One of the 2<sup>nd</sup> class passengers aboard the Titanic was a Catholic priest named Fr. Thomas Byles. If you watched the movie Titanic, you might recall seeing him toward the end of the film. Fr. Byles was the son of a Protestant minister. While attending Oxford, he was part of a group that engaged in a deep study of Christian faiths. Through that study, Fr. Byles and his friends slowly found themselves attracted to Catholicism. They ended up becoming Catholic and made it their life's ambition to share with others the great treasure of our faith. Thomas Byles was later ordained to the priesthood.

Fr. Byles set sail for New York with the rest of the passengers and crew of the Titanic on April 10, 1912. He was traveling to New York, where his brother lived, in order to celebrate his brother's upcoming marriage. Fr. Byles' brother also became Catholic and was marrying a Catholic.

On Sunday morning, April 14<sup>th</sup>, Fr. Byles celebrated Mass for many of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> class passengers. He gave a homily that morning using this example: our faith is a lifeboat for the shipwreck experiences we will have in life. That homily wasn't a premonition of what was to happen. Rather, he used what he thought was an appropriate example to impart to the congregation a deeper understanding of and appreciation for their Catholic faith.

Late in the evening of April 14<sup>th</sup>, Fr. Byles was walking around the promenade of the ship and praying his Breviary. At 11:40 pm he witnessed the Titanic hitting the iceberg and from what he saw, he knew the ship was in dire straits. He immediately went below deck and started helping the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> class passengers to their lifeboats.

Again, if you saw the movie Titanic, you may remember seeing passengers barricaded in their respective areas of the ship, locked behind iron gates. Historians tell us that this was probably more poetic license than fact on the part of James Cameron, the movie's director. The real difficulty on board the ship was that more than 30 languages were spoken by the passengers. Many of the passengers didn't know enough English to read the signs which directed passengers where to go in case of an emergency. It was Fr. Byles who went around to various areas in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> class cabins leading the people to the lifeboat deck.

Through all the commotion, Fr Byles heard confessions, gave absolution to the passengers, prayed with them, and strove to offer comfort to all who crossed his path in those early morning hours of April 15<sup>th</sup>. There are several eyewitness accounts which confirm that Fr. Byles was twice offered a seat on a lifeboat. Each time he refused, choosing instead to stay with those who couldn't get off the ship, giving absolution, praying with the passengers, and offering comfort. The passengers on the last few lifeboats which pulled away from the Titanic said the final words they heard from the ship were Fr. Byles leading the faithful in the Rosary.

The cause for Fr. Byles' canonization is underway, as it should be. Certainly, in the last three hours of his life, he acted most like Jesus Christ himself. He had little regard for his own survival and remained with the faithful until the end. He gave up his life, so that he could help lead others to eternal salvation by offering absolution, prayer, and comfort with his very last breath.

In today's gospel we hear about the Transfiguration of Jesus. Jesus brings his beloved disciples to the mountaintop. There they see him transfigured, a sign of what Christ and all the redeemed will look like in heaven. Along with Jesus is Moses and Elijah. The symbolism could not be clearer. We are to understand that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law, given to us by Moses, and he is the fulfillment of all the prophets, represented in the figure of Elijah. If you've ever participated in a Seder or Passover Meal, you know that a place is set at the table during that meal for the Prophet Elijah and the door of the house is opened for the prophet. The rationale is that Elijah would be the forerunner of the promised Messiah. When Elijah appears, the time of fulfillment is at hand. The Messiah is in our midst.

After the glory of the transfiguration fades, the gospel account tells us that Jesus led the disciples down the mountain. We are told that "coming down the mountain" is code for Jesus going to Jerusalem where he would be put to death. There's some sense that the disciples have a slight grasp of what Jesus' eventual destiny in Jerusalem would be (although they don't fully understand it yet). Jesus refers to that destiny when he speaks of rising from the dead.

For the remainder of the gospel, Jesus stays with his disciples. He teaches them. He witnesses his glory to them. He remains faithful, even when their faith is half-hearted, weak, and self-serving. Jesus Christ, true God and true man, stays with them until his very last breath. On the third day after his death, he is raised from the dead. The effect of that resurrection is also bestowed upon the disciples. The new life which Jesus experiences, he now gives to them. They begin to experience the effects of the resurrection when they speak new languages, heal the sick, and endure the pain, suffering, and even death inflicted upon them because of their faith in Jesus.

You and I look to Jesus for many things. Primary among them is healing as well as his help in solving life's dilemmas and challenges. While we sometimes experience physical healing or receive a tangible response from God for a problem which troubles us, Jesus reminds us that above and beyond all else, he is our companion. He walks with us. He stands by our side. He comforts us. He forgives us. He encourages us. He empowers us. And leads us to the everlasting life of the Kingdom.

At the end of our visit to the Titanic Artifact Museum, we were asked to look at a display board which listed all the passengers aboard that ship. As I scanned that board, I discovered that the passenger listed on my boarding pass had perished in the cold waters of the Atlantic Ocean on that fateful morning. It was a sobering moment. But as I scanned the board, my eyes were also drawn to the name Fr. Thomas Byles. He, too, perished as the great ship Titanic sank at 2:40 am. While I couldn't be certain, I'd like to think that Fr. Byles helped the passenger whose name was on my boarding pass. I imagined Fr. Byles offering him God's blessings, grace, comfort, and peace as that passenger passed from this world into entered eternal life. And I'd like to imagine that Fr. Byles helped the other 1,532 passengers experience God's mercy and abundant grace as they perished in those freezing waters that early morning.

Strengthened by Christ who was transfigured and then traveled to Jerusalem to suffer and save us from our sin, and strengthened by the faithful witness of Fr. Thomas Byles, may we, in some small or great way, lead others to a deeper faith and to safe passages.

Jesus Christ, who suffered, died, and rose again, pray for us.

Fr. Thomas Byles, faithful servant and example of God's presence and comfort even in life's most difficult moments, pray for us.

Amen? Amen.

