

TITANIC: A METAPHOR FOR THE 20TH CENTURY

Dr. Tim Ralston

The most expensive film in cinematic history has now also tied for first place as Hollywood's most lauded production. Its excellence is beyond dispute. James Cameron, the film's producer and director, in his acceptance speech before the Academy of the Oscar for the best original screenplay, made explicit his message for the film: "If the 'unsinkable' can sink, then the future is never certain and we can only really own today. ("*Carpe diem!*")"

The premise and first part of this lesson has been preached since the ship went down. The presumption of the ship's creators contributed to the tragedy, taught an emerging modern industrial world the danger of misplaced pride in technology, and tempered further advance with humility. The very name "Titanic" became one of humanity's great metaphors, and was perhaps the beginning of the demarcation between the optimism of the Nineteenth Century and the cynicism of the Twentieth.

But Cameron attaches another significance to the event. He infers that it teaches the true value of existentialism as a worldview (for more information on existentialism, see C.I.M.'s Briefing #50). This may reflect the emerging trend in art and philosophy true to the time of the film's subject and which has since come to dominate the contemporary western worldview and modern society, but such a perspective on life had not yet influenced the thinking of the many passengers on that night. The majority did restrain the overpowering impulse for self-preservation which has plunged many crises into anarchy. Many willingly sacrificed themselves for the greater good of others, a primary example of the quintessential expression of Christian virtue.

At the same time it is not accurate to suggest that Cameron's presentation of that night's events has been "sanitized" by the forces of postmodern political correctness. Every story is defined by the narrative unity that binds the disparate elements into a single thread whereby the lesson is learned. To focus exclusively upon objective issues of historical accuracy in everything would compromise the narrative and *Titanic* would have been a documentary without an ability to teach its enduring lessons.

Cameron's presentation is neither politically correct nor untrue to the historical events. The facts are beyond dispute. Second and third class passengers were prevented from reaching the lifeboats before the first class passengers had been accommodated. The survival rate for first class male adults was higher than that for third class (steerage) children of whom only 30% (23 out of 76) were saved. Of the women on the ship, those in first class had the greatest advantage: only 1 out of 143 died accidentally (0.6%) while the remaining three known to have died chose to remain with their husbands on board. The remaining classes did not fair as well. Of the women in second class 85 out of 93 (84%) were saved. Of those in third class only 98 out of 179 (55%) were saved. Some of the first class passengers ignored social conventions. Some of the men gave their place of rescue to women and children from the lower classes on the ship. But despite individual acts of sacrifice, the men of the first class did not severely disadvantage themselves for the sake of second and third class women and children.

Consider, too, that most of the lifeboats were launched with less than 30% of their capacity (a grand total of 700 passengers were rescued from the lifeboats despite a total potential capacity of 1178) and those in the lifeboats rowed just beyond the dangers posed by the sinking ship where they remained despite the megaphone pleas of Captain Smith to them from the ship's bridge. The occupants refused to aid those in mortal struggle with the frigid water (with the exception of the one lifeboat occupied by Molly Brown as in the movie).

Class distinctions extended even to the grave and then beyond. In burial, only first class passengers received caskets. All others were interred in their body bags. During the investigations that followed the disaster, precedence was given to the testimony of first and second class passengers (since only one third class passenger was interviewed), thereby skewing the published history of the event. As to financial compensation, surviving families of first class passengers were awarded \$50,000 for each loss of life while families of third class passengers received a mere \$1,500. Few disputed the final settlement. Clearly Cameron's *Titanic* recognizes and portrays a society that did view individuals of different social class with great disparity and whose discriminatory acts produced a greater loss of life than might have occurred had all human beings been treated with equal respect.

It is a different world today, but laying aside all issues of political correctness, Cameron's portrayal is accurate to the events, the time, and the place. It offends our modern sensitivities but don't condemn the film's creators. Lay the blame on our sanitized memory of a world which for the most part existed only as a nostalgic hologram of the imagination much like Arthur's Camelot, the knights of the Round Table, or the Quest for the Holy Grail.

How do we interpret Cameron's moral lesson of life's uncertainty and our existential response? Cameron's thesis finds a better exposition within the film's dialogue. It appears in full bloom through its spokesperson, Jack Dawson himself: since life is uncertain, take each day as it comes and live its circumstance to the full without regret. This is Jack's credo when questioned by the first class dinner guests and it receives their grudging approval.

Now the film's audience has the lens with which to interpret the entire narrative. We understand his seizing the opportunity to sail on the great ship, his unusual shipboard activities from bow to stern, his risks to save and converse with Rose, his vocation as an artist, her struggle and decision (conversion) to remain on the ship and save Jack, their moments at the stern as the ultimate challenge (where even the cinematography portrays the moment of final immersion more as a midway ride than a life-threatening crisis), and Jack's urging to her from the water for her survival. It provides the context for the first class men with no family who choose to die with great dignity, for the Captain who chooses to return to his bridge and suffer the same fate as his ship, for the band members who choose to play for the spirits of those surrounding them, for the many conscious acts of nobility by all who recognize the moment and do not retreat from it, for Rose's adoption of Jack's surname on the pier, and for the photographs on the nightstand of her subsequent life. Even the final curtain call after death honors in glorious array both the victims and survivors who lived and died by this dictum and among whom Jack is exalted on the staircase to welcome Rose's final addition to their company. Cameron's story holds up to public scrutiny and shows the acceptance of one of humanity's great values when faced with outrageous fortune.

However, some who have argued that Cameron's conclusion contradicts a Christian philosophy of life and is contrary to biblical principles, believe the whole message of *Titanic* must be rejected by Christians. But Cameron's starting point at least is right. Human limitations make the future (as well as a full understanding of both past and present) unknowable. Since we cannot be certain of anything, to boast in our human efforts is foolishness. (Compare this with the message of James 4:13-17.) Unfortunately, Cameron's existentialism, taken to its logical conclusion, can only lead to despair.

But Christians can see beyond Cameron's argument. Cameron has missed the assumption of an omniscient God whose sovereign will subsumes all human experience. A Christian's belief in God's over-arching control of all things does not allow ignorance of the future to provoke an existentialism of despair or unbridled hedonism. Instead, faith prompts the Christian to seek God's daily provision as Jesus Christ taught (Matthew 6:11), and like the Apostle Paul, to assert one's confident and courageous response to all of life's demands (Philippians 4:11). The Christian can and must make the most of every opportunity, particularly in times of adversity (Ephesians 5:16), the true *carpe diem* "seize the day") which represents our "triumph" (II Corinthians 2:12-17). Such a faith joins the Christian to the panoply of all those who have died while choosing to embrace their circumstances and their fate (Hebrews 11:1-12:3).

A thoughtful Christian will see parallels between the images of Cameron's *Titanic* and the biblical message. They are too obvious to ignore. The popularity of this film gives us unique insight into the unspoken desire of our world to live well despite one's circumstances. Therefore, the movie, *Titanic*, provides a new metaphor to express these same issues as they are taught for the followers of Jesus Christ with the added dimension of the deep sense of tragedy communicated by the historical event and its characters' limited spiritual response. James Cameron deserves our thanks. Inadvertently he has provided Christians with a wonderful artistic medium to appreciate and express their faith, and engage the world in conversation at the end of the Twentieth Century.

Copyright 1998

by Tim Ralston