



## **“THE TITANIC SUNK WHILE GOD WAS “WATCHING”**

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**SOKOTO, NIGERIA -**

The question of evil has remained with humans, right from time immemorial. A classic example of the question of evil and the suffering of the innocent can be found in the book of Job. “Man born of woman is short-lived and full of trouble” (Job 14:1). The scriptures tell us that human suffering cannot be approached scientifically. Good men as well as bad men suffer no matter how well you prepare. In Isaiah (52: 13- 53: 12), we read about the suffering servant; whose innocence and suffering cannot be rationally explained.

In modern history, Philosophers endeavoured to make sense out of human suffering. In Nietzsche’s critique of religion and metaphysics he pondered time and again why the human mind is bewitched by the notion of a true world behind the apparent world. His answer can be seen in a remark found among his notes after his death: “It is suffering

that inspires these conclusions: fundamentally they are desires that such a world should exist; in the same way, to imagine another, more valuable world is an expression of hatred for a world that makes one suffer: the resentment of metaphysicians against actuality is here creative" (Will to Power, 579).

Nietzsche wrestled with this problem in his first published book, *The Birth of Tragedy*. There, he argued that the Greeks were "keenly aware of the terrors and horrors of existence." To endure those terrors, the Greeks interposed between life and themselves as "shining fantasy of the Olympians." The Greeks' folk wisdom was enshrined in the myth in which King Midas hunts down the wise Silenus and asks him about the most desirable thing of all. Silenus answers: "What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best for you is – to die soon". In other words, immunity to suffering is dying as soon as you are born: This is inspired by the stark reality of pains in our world and our immediate

environment.

For good or for ill, Covid-19 will remain on our lips for some time. It has brought untold pains and suffering to millions of Nigerians it has brought untold sadness to many. We have lost thousands of lives and billions of naira. The suffering that comes with Covid-19 would have been solved, according to Nietzsche, if one died as soon as one was born.

But to be alive means occasionally enduring such tragedies. Tragedy, whether caused by natural or human factors have always left us in pains. One of such in modern history is the tragedy of the Titanic ship. RMS Titanic was a British passenger liner, operated by the White Star Line. The ship, sank in the North Atlantic Ocean in the early morning hours of April 15, 1912, after striking an iceberg during her maiden voyage from Southampton to New York City. Out of the estimated 2,224 passengers and crew aboard, more than 1,500 died, making the sinking one of modern history's deadliest peacetime commercial marine disasters.

RMS Titanic was the largest ship afloat at the time she entered service, and was the second of three Olympic-class ocean liners operated by the White Star Line. She was built by the Harland and wolf shipyard in Belfast. Thomas Andrews, chief naval architect of the shipyard at the time, died in the disaster. The ship was built in four years between 1908 and 1912. It cost GB £1.5 million (£140 million in 2020) and in naira that would be N56, billion in 2020. This tragedy defied preparedness of maritime technology. In the movie, Titanic, based on the true-life story of Beatrice Wood, Rose Calvert and Leonardo Di Caprio acted together as main characters; re-enacting the experience of the survivors.

One of the moving scenes in the movie is the band singing the hymn: "Nearer, My God, to Thee," a 19th-century Christian hymn by Sarah Flower Adams, which retells the story

of Jacob's dream (Genesis 28:11-12). They sang the song in the face of utter hopelessness and death of hundreds of people on board. The tragedy of death and pain did not forestall them from singing; at best this hymn is a song of surrender to God. As St Paul captures it more succinctly, whether we are alive or dead we belong to God (Rom 14: 8). Thus, we can equally say, God “watched” as the Titanic ship was sinking, just as He “watches” the COVID 19 ravaged the world, claiming hundreds of thousands of lives. In our pains; Mystics, Philosophers and Theologians like St Augustine have tried to make sense out of any moral or physical evil.

St. Augustine reflects on this in his great work, *The City of God*. The work, which he considered his greatest, was occasioned by the decline of the Roman Empire and the sacking of the city of Rome by barbarians under Alaric in 410 AD. Augustine wrote the work to ponder how a once mighty empire had fallen into such decay. There were of course many sufferings inflicted on the citizens of Rome by the Barbarians. “Sacks” are not pleasant events. Some were killed, many women were raped, grave damage was inflicted on the city, and the property of many were damaged and taken. In chapter 28 of the *City of God*, Augustine ponders why God would have allowed such suffering, especially to the Christians of that city, and in particular to the Christian women of virtue who were raped. At times, his reflections seem almost unsympathetic. But in effect, St. Augustine points to humiliation and suffering as a strong but necessary medicine for

pride, which is far worse than any of the ills suffered to remedy it. Very importantly, St. Augustine begins by disclaiming any ability to offer a complete explanation for suffering. He says: If you ask me why they [the Barbarians] were allowed the liberty of committing these sins, the answer is that the providence of the Creator and Ruler of the world transcends human reckoning (Psalm 138).

Like the victims of the Titanic tragedy and Covid-19, none was experienced by the victims by any act of negotiations. Suffering whether caused by physical or moral evil makes us shining examples of history, when we pull through in faith. Like Job in the bible; the victims of holocaust, as in the story of Maximilian Kolbe. The victims of Rwandan Genocide as in Immaculee Ilibagiza, the victims of Boko Haram like Leah Shaibu, the victims of kidnappers like the twin brother of late Michael Nnadi: the slain seminarian of Sokoto Diocese. And the perfect model of suffering is Jesus himself. As we go through this moment of great uncertainty let me suggest few things to distract us from the “boredom” of the moment.

Find time to read again and again the amazing stories in the bible like the story of Job and his friends, (Job 4-23); the inspiring Story of David’s Plight and Flight (I Sam 21-24), The touching story of Jeremiah the weeping prophet (Jer 31:27-34) and the story of Peter’s denial. (Matt 26:34-75). On a very light mood: It will be great also to connect back

to old books and movies that made you happy when you were young. What was that book that was fantastic when you read it in the university or in the secondary school? Go and find them on your bookshelf or in your store and read them again. For me, it is the Trials for Brother Jero by Wole Soyinka, A man of the People by Chinua Achebe.

Others are Cry Freedom by Peter Abrahams, The River Between by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Jagua Nana by Cyprian Ekwensi. Any of these books will take you back, bring all those memories and fill you with the joy you need at this time. Get that book that brings it all back. Borrow one from a friend if you have lost yours; reward yourself. Call a friend from your past and share (Eugenia Abu, Daily Trust, 2020). It is our prayer that this ship of Covid -19 will not sink humanity before our brave scientists and governments across Africa, Europe, Asia, and the Americas come up with a lasting solution. In the meantime, let us keep the social distancing, avoid non-essential travels; wash your hands regularly for at least 20 seconds. While God “watched” his Son die on the cross, he surprised the world with the mystery and the glory of the resurrection.