

Christmass Eve 2021

Marley was dead...so begins 'A Christmas Carol' by Charles Dickens.

Chatting with the Bishop when he visited us recently he said he had been interviewed earlier that day on the radio. All went smoothly until at the end of the interview he was asked what his favourite Christmas movie was. I think he managed to remember some films; and we all then chimed in with our favourites. 'Bad Santa' was mentioned but apparently that is not a suitable movie for those in episcopal orders!

It got me thinking and I remembered in 1970 going to the pictures as a family. We went to see a new release called 'Scrooge,' a musical based on 'A Christmas Carol.' As a 10 year old, I was entranced by this film, and Susan and I sat down last weekend and watched it again. It still has some appeal, but of course over 50 years later I was watching it with very different eyes.

I don't wish to canonise Dickens, he was a paradoxical figure, hardly a paragon of virtue in private, but he was an astute observer of life. His novels speak of the poverty and the inequality that was so much a part of the world he saw around him and he was a vocal critical of the economic, social and political world of Victorian England.

After Dickens's death his social theory was long regarded as oversimplified, naïve, sentimental; the Christian faith is also criticised thus. But what Dickens does for me is just that...engage me at that emotional level. His was not a political manifesto – as an aside, apparently Marx was a fan of Dickens, he simply wrote about generosity, common humanity. What Dickens does is engage our imaginations, our emotional intelligence, this cannot be the full story, we do need to be wary of our emotional responses, but it so often the beginning of things, sometimes great things.

There are many subtle themes running in the novel. Poor old Ebenezer Scrooge is a grotesque archetype of all that is wrong with capitalism, and with the consumer society. At the time the novella was written in the 1840s Thomas Carlyle the Scottish philosopher had written 'cash payment is the sole nexus between man and man... but there are so many things which cash will not pay!' And so when Scrooge wakes up on Christmas morning having experienced the last of a series of nightmares in which he is visited by three ghosts who reveal to him his past, present and future, he doesn't simply wake up, he is reborn. In his last nightmare the future is grim, he is more frightened by the Ghost of Christmas future than the others. His first words on waking...I'm alive! And this new life includes ensuring his clerk Bob Cratchett has a living wage, his son Tiny Tim receives the medical attention he needs and the family enjoys a Happy Christmas.

This is what Christmas is about at its heart, yes we celebrate the birth of the Christ child of Bethlehem, but importantly we celebrate our own rebirth, Scrooge is reborn on Christmas morning, redeemed, renewed. Dickens' childhood was not a happy one, and Scrooge in the dream is shown his unhappy youth. This is the key to opening the novella; our giving of presents one to another is a sign of

renewal, we show worth to each other, our generosity is not simply a sign of sentiment but of the reality of how we are made new by the birth of Christ, each of us is of inestimable worth! So Christmas is not all sentiment, it has a strong ethical component, an ethic founded on the reality of renewed humanity.

I think 'A Christmas Carol' can be considered a strongly Christian text. Very soon we will celebrate the coming of the three sages to the child Jesus. With their gifts to Jesus of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh. They are the almost the three ghosts of the novella. Frankincense for Deity – Christ is God come among us, Gold for Kingship - Christ is now King and Myrrh the stuff of embalming pointing forward to the death Christ will endure for us. Past, present and future. This renewed humanity of ours is all about the present, our past redeemed and our future assured.

But before the sages came the first witnesses were the shepherds. If Dickens were a writing a story of pastoral England it would have been the rural workers he would have written about. The shepherds are the lowest caste and the Christmas story reminds us of the renewal of all humanity even those most disadvantaged.

Marley was dead! Scrooge too was dead to the world and to those around him. Their lives were immersed in the world of money, the cash nexus. Christmas, oddly enough, has become a reminder to us today of the consumer society. But when we scratch the surface and look beyond the tinsel and all the other paraphernalia, when we look beyond the market forces that seem to dominate, we discover new life. Few of us are quite as horrid as Scrooge – Dickens uses 8 adjectives to describe just how horrible he is, but the human condition is such that we do look back at what might have been – perhaps sometimes with sadness, we look forward and wonder what will be – sometimes anxiously, but Christmas reminds us that in Christ all will be made alive, we can with Scrooge wake on Christmas morning with the words...I'm alive. God bless us one and all!

A very happy and holy Christmas to you all. Amen.