

FOREWORD

“I have endeavoured in this Ghostly little book, to raise the Ghost of an Idea, which shall not put my readers out of humour with themselves, with each other, with the season, or with me. May it haunt their houses pleasantly, and no one wish to lay it.”

So wrote Charles Dickens in the original edition of *A Christmas Carol*.

And indeed the story has haunted our imaginations and our Christmas celebrations ever since. Published in the year that the first Christmas cards made their appearance, the images in Dickens’ story have continued to be part of our collective imagination of what Christmas ought to be like. The simple pleasures of family life, good food and good company, generosity and compassion, are contrasted for us, not only with the bitterness and barrenness of Ebenezer Scrooge’s existence, but also with the relentless consumerism and pressures of our modern Christmases. And the story stirs in us a nostalgia for a past that perhaps we never knew, but of which we feel the loss.

Numerous films have been made of it; it has been adapted for stage and ballet. Shakespearian actors and puppets have interpreted the characters, and a Christmas doesn’t go by without at least one version of the story showing on television.

But, good as these are, it would be a pity if we were to forget to read this treasure of a book, with its wonderful atmospheric language and images, and its stimulus to our imagination. Dickens makes us smile one moment, gasp the next, laugh out loud, then shed a tear, and I guess that’s why *A Christmas Carol* still appeals to the hundreds of thousands of children of all ages who read this story each year – and I have to say, it still appeals to me.

For it is not just the plot which has so enduringly captured our hearts, but the characters and the language in which they are brought to life.

First, we meet Scrooge, a man who cares nothing for the people around him; humankind exists only for the money that can be made through exploiting them. A man whose response to a request to help the poor is to refer them to the prisons, the Union Workhouse, the Treadmill and the Poor Law.

“A tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching covetous old sinner!... External heat and cold had little influence on Scrooge. No warmth could warm, no wintry weather chill him. No wind that blew was bitterer than he, no falling snow was more intent upon its purpose, no pelting rain less open to entreaty.”

Returning home to his barren lodging, after harshly berating his nephew, his clerk, charity collectors and carol singers, we see him, as the very antithesis of the Christmas spirit, the rejection of all that gives life and beauty and warmth to the world. He radiates a kind of human darkness. As he carries his one mean candle into his unlit rooms, we read: “darkness is cheap and Scrooge liked it”.

A man, if ever there was one, in need of redemption and restoration! And so we enter the story of the hauntings, knowing that they must not be things of terror but of hope. He isn't beyond all help, for he can, if he is willing, take the chance of leaving his darkness behind.

Through the night of his hauntings he is shown the contrast to his own life in the light and warmth of the people he knows: the colours and music and dancing, the feasting and joyful generosity of the Fezziwigs at the jolliest office party ever; the homely love and humility and hope of Bob Cratchitt and his family; the laughter, and games and open-heartedness of his

nephew's party; even the simplest enjoyment and celebration of the season deep in a mining community, or in the isolation of a lighthouse in a stormy sea.

And we see the ice in Scrooge's heart thawing under the influence of his memories of happiness, and his new understanding of how his life affects others.

But our affection for this story is not just a nostalgia for a perfect, golden age. Because Dickens makes it clear that the condition of society was far from ideal.

There was poverty, ignorance and want, death and illness, debt and misery, caused by the grasping exploitation of people like Scrooge. What was and is needed is not just a change of attitude, but a whole change of behaviour and responsibility.

And so Scrooge is not only shown scenes of joy. He is taken to see an obscure part of town where "the ways were foul and narrow, the shops and houses wretched, the people half-naked, slipshod, drunken, ugly... and the whole quarter reeked with crime, with filth and misery". Here, in a parody of the opening of Christmas presents, the dead Scrooge's meagre possessions are picked over and sold.

Some people argue that it was indeed the desperate condition of the poor in the city which prompted Dickens to write a story that communicated the traditional Christmas spirit through a secular story. Just as Scrooge is shown a vision of what is in store for him, Dickens' readers are also warned of what is in store for England unless they seek not only social reform, but moral and religious transformation as well.

And I believe we love this book because it also reminds us of our better nature, of the best in our characters – that we were created to love justice, mercy, and compassion.

We leave it feeling that we, like Scrooge, can keep Christmas in our hearts all year. It is a reminder of the eternal truth of the original Christmas story. Namely that the essence of what it is to be God and what it is to be human is self-giving love and not

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self-absorption or assertiveness. That lives lived without love or compassion are bleak, dark, and bound for misery; and that we are all in need of love and restoration.

With Scrooge's nephew we rejoice when Scrooge makes his tentative entry to the party; like the original author of our lives, we rejoice in this happy ending: the safe return of a soul that was lost; the irredeemable has been given his life again. The best Christmas gift imaginable.

John Sentamu

May, 2010