

A Delightful New Year
Sunday, January 5, 2020

GK Chesterton was an English poet, philosopher, theologian, critic, and novelist – he wrote the Father Brown mystery series – who was born in 1874, four years after Charles Dickens died. He was raised as a Unitarian but had the soul of a mystic and since there wasn't much room for mystics in the Unitarianism of his age, his journey eventually brought him to the Roman Catholic church. But he held onto the Unitarian vision of religion as a force for good in this world, not for a future life, and his poems and his stories offered the vision of a world where justice reigns and eventually all people will feel themselves truly at home. Someone once asked him the desert island question: what book would you want to have with you if you were stranded on one; his quick answer was, *Thomas' Guide to Practical Shipbuilding*. But his next, more serious answer was Charles Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers*. The mystic Chesterton loved the social justice writer Dickens. He wrote a book on Dickens and his novels which helped to reintroduce Dickens' works to the 20th century. And he filled in a gap in *A Christmas Carol*.

Almost every street, church, game, piece of music, or dish in that story can be tied to some part of Dickens' 19th century world. Scholars have identified the area where Scrooge and Marley's countinghouse stands, the house the Cratchit family rents – the same house Dickens' father moved his family to in Camden Town when they came to London; they can tell you what would have been on the Cratchit's Christmas dinner table and what games Scrooges' nephew and his friends were playing on Christmas afternoon. But there's one thing they can't tell us. When the Ghost of Christmas present takes Scrooge to observe the Cratchit family's Christmas dinner, Dickens describes:

All this time the chestnuts and the jug went round and round; and by-and-bye they had a song, about a lost child travelling in the snow, from Tiny Tim, who had a plaintive little voice, and sang it very well indeed.

No one has been able to find such a song. So Chesterton wrote one. He called it *A Child of the Snows*:

*There is heard a hymn when the panes are dim,
And never before or again,
When the nights are strong with a darkness long,
And the dark is alive with rain.*

*Never we know but in sleet and in snow,
The place where the great fires are,
That the midst of the earth is a raging mirth
And the heart of the earth a star.*

*And at night we win to the ancient inn
Where the child in the frost is furred,
We follow the feet where all souls meet
At the inn at the end of the world.*

*The gods lie dead where the leaves lie red,
For the flame of the sun is flown,
The gods lie cold where the leaves lie gold,
And a Child comes forth alone.*

I don't know exactly what the words mean, but they seem appropriate for Dickens' time, "the best of times, the worst of times" and for our own, which could also be "the best of times, the worst of times." Because Chesterton reminds us that it is only in the darkness and the cold, in sleet and in snow, in the hard uncomfortable times, that we understand the reality of the warmth and light which lies at the heart of the earth, the heart of our life. And the poem reminds us that even when we think all is lost, when even the gods lie dead, there is still the Child, still hope, still life, still joy to come forth.

With the news of fires raging in Australia and the assassination of Soleimani in Iraq, I wondered if a sermon on keeping Christmas in our hearts was still what I needed to say to today, still what you might need to hear. But I think it is. For the Christmas spirit Scrooge found, the Christmas spirit we need to hold onto, isn't about jollity and games and feasting, though those may be part of it. The basis of the Christmas spirit is regarding ourselves and absolutely everyone else as worthy of care, as delightful. It is living as if all of Life, not just our own individual lives, is a valuable gift. And think how different our society and our planet might be if more of us did actually live with the Christmas spirit throughout the year.

In the Women Touched by Grace program that I attended in November, on the final day the presenter talked about resilience. As clergy, we participants all spend a lot of our time and our energy taking care of other people and we often forget to take care of ourselves. A 2013 study found that clergy are more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety than is average in the general population. But

these days I think that many of us who are trying to care for others and for our world are likely to feel overwhelmed, anxious, and depressed. So the skills I learned about resilience are important for all of us to practice in the new year. And interestingly, we can see Scrooge living into these practices too as *A Christmas Carol* ends.

To maintain our resilience when times are hard we need purpose, care, and connection. We need to feel that what we are doing matters. We need to keep our souls and our bodies healthy. And we need to know that we are not alone, that we have friends who support us, tease us, challenge us, and make us laugh.

At the end of *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge's life has opened out from making money for the sake of money, to using his wealth to improve the life of the Cratchit family, especially Tiny Tim, and to help the poor in general. As he walks on Christmas morning he meets one of the gentlemen who had come to his office the afternoon before to ask him for a donation to help the poor. Scrooge had turned him away with the memorable response that he supported the prisons and the workhouses and the poor had better go there or "decrease the surplus population." But now after his night of transformation, when he sees the man he had turned away, he catches up to him, takes his hands, asks his pardon for his behavior and offers a donation to his charity. Dickens doesn't state the amount, only the gentleman's response to it: "*Lord bless me!*" *cried the gentleman, as if his breath were taken away. "My dear Mr. Scrooge, are you serious?"* So clearly it's a big one. And then Scrooge asks the man to come and see him so that they can talk about how he can get involved more. We can imagine Scrooge in future sitting on charitable boards or supporting a school for orphans as Dickens did, unlinking his chains of cash boxes and helping others while he can. This purpose, along with his interest in the Cratchet family, would give color and warmth to his days.

And it would give him connection as well. Scrooge at the beginning of the book is a lonely, isolated person. Jacob Marley, his only friend, had died seven years earlier. And Jacob Marley wasn't – at least in life – a friend who encouraged Ebenezer Scrooge to be his best self. But after Scrooge's transformation, Dickens tells us he became a second father to Tiny Tim and we can imagine that he also became important to Tiny Tim's siblings too, perhaps finding a good post for his older brother Peter and helping his sister Martha to leave her position working for a milliner, one of the most difficult positions a young woman of her time could take, and finding easier work or perhaps even funding her to go to school to study music as Dickens's sister Fanny had been helped. He would have had a place at the

family table. And he also was welcomed into his nephew's house; perhaps here he found the friends to tease him and challenge him. His nephew's friends seem like a fun group and we know that his nephew was always pushing Scrooge to live the Christmas spirit even when there seemed no hope. The poet Carol Ann Duffy in her poem "Mrs. Scrooge" even imagines him marrying - he was after all only in his mid-fifties - and enjoying the companionship of a wife who was an activist in her own right. And in the poem Mrs. Scrooge brings out Scrooge's teasing side - every Christmas he gives her his favorite candies - Humbugs.

Having purpose and connections nourished his soul. Dickens tells us Scrooge went to church on that Christmas morning, so perhaps in the months following he began attending regularly and maybe also took on practices of prayer and contemplation which also fed his spirit. And of course, church is a place to find connections as well. We don't know that he took better care of his body, but since we do know that he began to feel better about himself, we can imagine that he began to heat his rooms more generously and feed himself more than thin gruel and what Dickens described as his usual melancholy dinner in a melancholy tavern. At least at the tables of the Cratchits and his nephew and the new friends who would have welcomed him, he would have been better fed. Exercise is also an important component of self-care but in Scrooge's time exercise was more automatically a part of life than in ours. Scrooge walked from his home to his office and to the Exchange every day. Perhaps after enjoying the dancing he'd witnessed at Fezziwig's party and his nephew's dinner, he also took up dancing again - a great way to exercise body and spirit.

All of these practices implicit in Dickens's story helped Scrooge keep Christmas in his heart and help him to change his world. We too are trying to change our world. The work can be exhausting and discouraging. Often the news is bleak. The only way we can continue the work of our hopes is to practice keeping Christmas in our hearts too. We too need purpose, care, and connection.

Today is the end of Christmas and the end of our series on Scrooge's transformation, but it's just the beginning of our transformations. What chains are you releasing yourself from and how will that release enable you to live more fully? How will you follow the star of purpose this year? How will you nourish yourself with care and offer care to others? How will you find delight and renewal in your connections? If you're looking for ideas or suggestions, please come talk with me - I am happy to listen and come up with ideas for practices and to point you to some of the resources I've been drawing on for this sermon. If you're looking to feed your

spirit, our Monday night meditation and the gratitude groups are great ways to start. If you have suggestions for other programs we could offer for the spirit, for the body, for deepening connections, for sharing Christmas spirit with the larger world, please know that I and the Parish Committee are happy to hear them and to work with you on making them happen.

Yes, the world is bleak, but here in this church we have Chesterton's equivalent of that ancient inn where all souls meet, the inn from which the child, our hope, our love, our peace, our joy, may come forth. Here we encourage one another to keep Christmas in our hearts all year and to live Christmas in our days. In winter's gloom, may we hold onto the warmth of Dickens' vision for the possibilities of human transformation and may we remember Chesterton's summation of them:

*Never we know but in sleet and in snow,
The place where the great fires are,
That the midst of the earth is a raging mirth
And the heart of the earth a star.*

- Pamela M. Barz