

## "THE CONVERSION OF SCROOGE"

INTRODUCTION Christmas has a unique way of awakening our sensibilities and firing up the imagination. It has inspired a tremendous amount of prose and poetry.

One writer, of course, who felt the power of Christmas in a moving way was Charles Dickens. The result was his immortal classic, A Christmas Carol. Why some of the characters in that work have peopled our world for years. We know them well, don't we - Tiny Tim, Bob Cratchit, Jacob Marley, Ebenezer Scrooge. Even before the dawn of television, we had them fleshed out in our minds.

STORY OF A CONVERSION Dickens' Christmas Carol is essentially the story of a conversion. And there 's something good and healthy about that for us. We live in a time when it's popular to think of mass transformations of society. Thus, we're at home with terms like political reform, urban renewal, re-negotiating, re-structuring and so on.

What we seem to have stopped believing in and looking for is the transformation of individual men and women. Surely no lasting change can be effected in society by schemes that are engineered entirely from without. What is needed as well is something new on the inside. As someone once observed, "what's the point of a brave new world if you have the same, old people in it?"

A Christmas Carol holds out the hope to us that people can be changed, that you and I can be different. Perhaps this is the reason we never tire of it.

SCROOGE The person changed in Dickens' story is that old curmudgeon with the "impossible to forget" name - Ebenezer Scrooge. He was a mean one if ever there was one. Dickens describes him as a "squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner!"

Old Scrooge had few friends. Nobody ever stopped him on the street to ask him how he was. He was a miserly old skinflit who thought that all sentiment was a waste. When people wished him a Merry Christmas you recall his answer, "Bah! Humbug". Christmas was for fools. Said Scrooge, "If I could work my will, every idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips should be broiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart."

HIS CONVERSION The conversion of Scrooge happened in clearly marked stages, each of which involved a session with a spirit from another world. The first, you'll recall, took place on Christmas Eve. Scrooge was in his gloomy lodging. He had put on his night clothes and was seated before the fire taking his gruel. Then it happened. A ghost appeared. It was the ghost of his longtime partner, Jacob Marley, now seven years dead. No man can change unless he is first distributed by what he is, and Marley's mission was to break the stony ground of Scrooge's heart.

Scrooge could not help noticing that Marley's ghost was dragging a chain. Somewhat fearfully he said to his visitor. "You are fettered. Tell me why?" "I wear the chain I forged in life" replied the ghost. "I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it. Is its pattern strange to you?"

Still not convinced, Scrooge responded, "But you were always a good man of

business, Jacob. "Business" cried the Ghost. "Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence - all were my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business".

Then, reflecting on the fact that it was Christmas, Marley's Ghost went on, "At this time of the rolling year I suffer most. Why did I walk through crowds of fellow beings with my eyes turned down, and never raise them to that blessed star which led the Wise Men to a poor abode. Were there no poor homes to which its light would have conducted me?"

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At least four Christmases were visited again. There was the Christmas of his childhood when once more he was surrounded by familiar sights and sounds. "Good heaven" said Scrooge, "I was bred in this place. I was a boy here." "And" says Dickens. "he was conscious of a thousand odors floating in the air. Each one connected with a thousand thoughts and hopes and joys, and cares long, long forgotten". He remembered bidding "Merry Christmas" to boyhood friends.

Then, he saw himself, in a second Christmas, at boarding school. It was over the holiday season and all the other students had gone home. There he sat alone. But he brightened and he remembered his reading of that time. He had read with great delight Arabian Nights and Robinson Crusoe. After recalling those happy hours, he whispered to himself, "Poor boy...I wish...but it's too late".

He then went on to a Christmas that he once enjoyed as an apprentice to a man with a strange name, but a bright face - Mr. Fezziweg. He recalled how on Christmas Eve the shutters were placed on the old warehouse and the inner floor was cleared and a fiddler came in and food was provided in abundance. All made merry.

And then he was shown a Christmas in the prime of his life. "His face had not the harsh and rigid lines of later years, but it had begun to wear the signs of care and avarice. There was an eager, greedy, restless motion in his eye that hadn't been there in his youth". Perhaps the most tender moment of all was when he was reminded of the girl he could not marry because his love for gold had displaced her as the object of his affection. He was given to see young Belle now married to another. He saw her surrounded by her children, and noted especially a daughter that might very well have been his own. He thought sadly how that child might have been a "springtime in the haggard Winter of his life".

We are - each of us - vulnerable to memory. No matter how old, how wise, how rich, how sophisticated we may be, memory has a way of opening us up. The boy or the girl in us will not be denied. We have those moments when we become sensitive to dreams of earlier times and the recollections of those who have helped us along the way when we were scarcely worth the helping. The poignant question that rises

in such moments is, "Have we paid too much for what we have?" "Has it been worth it?" This was Thomas Hood's mood when he penned those lines:

"I remember, I remember, the fir trees dark and high;  
I used to think their slender tops were close against the sky;  
It was a childish ignorance, but now 'tis little joy  
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#### CHRISTMAS PRESENT

The second spirit to come was that of Christmas present. And here Scrooge was taken on a grand tour of what Christmas means to other people.

It began in a grubby neighborhood. Says Dickens,

"There was nothing very cheerful in the climate or the town, and yet there was an air of cheerfulness abroad that the clearest summer air and brightest summer sun might have endeavored to diffuse in vain."

Scrooge is taken, almost simultaneously, to a community where miners live, enjoying each other's company on that festal day. To a light house standing in the sea surrounded by graceful gulls, where two lonely men inside wish each other a "merry Christmas", and talk of home. To a ship at sea where every man on board is humming a Christmas tune and speaking of some past Christmas to his mate. To foreign lands where in strange settings carols are sung and hearts are warm. Home again - to sick beds, almshouses, hospitals, jails.

Then, finally, to the modest house where his clerk, Bob Cratchit, and his family live. And that scene made its mark on Scrooge. Even though they were down to almost nothing, there was more joy in one corner of that house than Scrooge had ever known.

"They were not a handsome family. They were not well dressed. Their shoes were far from being waterproof, their clothes were scanty and very likely Peter had known the inside of a pawnbroker's. But they were happy, grateful, pleased with one another and contented with the time."

We are - each of us - vulnerable to goodness. We stand open to the challenge of the simpler life. We know in our wiser moments that there is no direct correlation between wealth and happiness. Frequently we are stung into an awareness of our poverty by noticing how rich other lives can be. How disconcerting it was to Scrooge, and how so to others, that others find so much in so little while many of us find so little in so much.

#### CHRISTMAS YET TO COME

The third spirit to visit ol' Scrooge was that of Christmas yet to come. He was given a preview of the future that he was building for himself. It started there in his own community. He went down around the business exchange where some of his cronies were prone to meet late in the afternoon. Behold! They were discussing a death. And they were discussing it quite nonchalantly and indifferently. They felt no loss, and were experiencing no sorrow. Said one to another,

"It's likely to be a very cheap funeral, for upon my life,

don't know of anybody who's going to it. Suppose we make up a party and volunteer?" Another said, "Unless there's a lunch, I won't go. I must be fed."

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Then he wonders. He turns to the spirit a second time and says, "I understand you, and I would do it if I could, but I have not the power". Then hope breaks in as he begins to question whether this future is unalterably cast. "Are these the shadows of the things that will be, or are they the shadows of the things that may be. Good spirit, assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life."

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"I'm light as a feather, I'm happy as an angel. I am as merry as a schoolboy. I am as giddy as a drunken man. A Merry Christmas to everybody. A happy New Year to all. Hello there. Whoops. Hello!"

He even went to Church. He bought the biggest turkey he could find and sent it to Bob Cratchit's home. He even had the humility to go to his nephew's house for dinner for the first time ever.

I know we're all tempted to say it was only momentary sentiment. But hold on. No! He also raised Bob Cratchit's salary and that would go on and on. He became like a second father to Tiny Tim. He developed into a respected citizen of his town.

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He knew that he was loved - for even in his wretched days of introversion and selfishness his nephew had never stopped wishing him the merriest of Christmases.

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Old Scrooge had few friends. Nobody ever stopped him on the street to ask him how he was. He was a miserly old skinflit who thought that all sentiment was a waste. When people wished him a Merry Christmas he would reply abruptly, "Bah! Humbug". Christmas was for fools. Said Scrooge, "If I could work my will, every idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips should be broiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart."

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He knew that he was loved - for even in his wretched days of introversion his nephew had never stopped wishing him the merriest of Christmases. Even when no one else could stand him, Bob Cratchit toasted him every Christmas eve. He knew that he was loved.

He knew that he was needed. Tiny Tim might live if Scrooge got with it. The town could be a better place to live were he to turn loose some of what he had to give.

MESSAGE OF CHRISTMAS Friends, this is the message of this Holy Season. You are loved. You are needed. To spurn that love and ignore that need is to die. To answer "yes" is to pass from death back to life. Wise men came to Christmas and went home - went back - another way. So, too, can you!



PRAYER

Open our eyes, O God, to the possibilities of grace at work, the wonders that love can accomplish....and grant that all who feel the pull of Christmas in these coming days - even in the meagerest way - may come to know Jesus - not by hearsay, but by personal experience. And as they brush up against divine truth once again, may they, too, go home a different way. In the spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen