

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

In spite of what you might think, Christmas was not the first of Christian holy days. In fact, it wasn't celebrated at all until about the fourth century. Until recently, the church has been ambivalent about celebrating Christmas. There was a time during the middle of the 17th century when it was illegal to celebrate Christmas in most of the English-speaking world. Carolers could wind up in the stocks. Apparently the Puritans found all of the joy and present-giving and decorations to be shameless and pagan.

Even after the laws against celebrating Christmas were taken off the books, Christmas remained a lesser holiday. As late as 1843 there were no decorated Christmas trees in England or the United States, no Christmas turkeys, no Christmas cards and no Christmas presents. All these things followed the enormous success of a book by Charles Dickens, **A Christmas Carol** published just before Christmas in 1843.

I'm reading a recent biography of Charles Dickens by Les Standiford.¹ In it, Standiford describes how Dickens "invented," or perhaps more appropriately, **reinvigorated** Christmas. In the 1830's and 40's, Dickens was by far the most popular author in England. His **Pickwick Papers**, **Oliver Twist**, **Nicholas Nickleby** and **The Old Curiosity Shop** had made him a literary giant. **The Pickwick Papers** had a readership of about 100,000, and there were probably no more than 400,000 literate people in England, so the serialization of the book had been purchased by a quarter of all the literate people in England. A similar best-seller today would sell about 50 million copies – in fact, only a few books sell more than a million copies in English.

¹ Les Standiford, (2008). *The Man Who Invented Christmas*. NY: Crown Publishers.

However, as 1843 rolled around, Dickens had written two unpopular books in a row, **Martin Chuzzlewit** and the mean-spirited travel diary, **American Notes**. Critical and popular opinion began to turn against him, a phenomenon all too common today for those who get a little too famous, a little too confident. Dickens was facing bankruptcy and he was planning to move to the Continent to live a little more cheaply and away from the crowds. He figured that he could lie low for a while until his fans started to miss him and then make a brilliant comeback.

So, in early October of 1843, just before his planned move to France, Dickens spoke at a workingmen's club, the Athenaeum in Manchester. His speech there was very warmly received. Dickens was always quite a performer. Later in life, he would make a very respectable living from public readings of the things he had written. This night he spoke about education and humane values and the elimination of ignorance and poverty. The crowd there just loved it. After the speech, Dickens walked the streets of Manchester that October night recalling how he had lost his way, how he needed to get back to plain storytelling as he told a friend later, "without browbeating or scolding, or mounting a soapbox."

When he got back to England, he continued his evening walks, and as he walked a tale began to form in his mind, a tale of a mean-spirited miser who is visited by ghosts, ghosts of his past, his present and his likely future. The result, of course, was **A Christmas Carol**, his tale of Ebenezer Scrooge, the three spirits, and the Cratchit family and their ailing son, Tiny Tim. He wrote the manuscript in six weeks and published it himself on December 19, 1843.

The book has sold millions of copies, spawned hundreds of stage, movie and television productions and its plot and characters are staples in popular culture. Everyone knows a Scrooge.

What might account for the popularity of this book? It seems to me that the heart of the story is the idea that people can change, that people can be changed, can be made new by being confronted with the truth about themselves, confronted with the likely consequences of their actions. The relentless pursuit of gain is trumped by generosity, charity and compassion.

You see, people wanted to and people still want to hear that they can have another chance, that they can make a new start. People wanted to and people still want to hear that the past need not imprison us, that our mistakes can be forgiven, that what is important is how we end the journey and not how we begin it. This is the essential message of Dickens' Christmas Carol and is also the essential meaning of the birth of the Christ child. Dickens got that right.

Let me read you a brief passage from the end of the story. "Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all, and infinitely more; and to Tiny Tim, who did not die, he was a second father. He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough, in the good old world. Some people laughed to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh, and little heeded them ... His own heart laughed: and that was quite enough for him."

With the publication of "A Christmas Carol," Dickens' financial situation and his literary legacy were assured and Christmas as a holiday took hold, for good or for ill, in the imagination and the economics of the English-speaking world. To be sure, the holiday is no longer simply the commemoration of the humble birth of the Messiah in a stable in Bethlehem and has become as much a celebration of human consumption as God's compassion.

But Christmas and the start of a New Year can help to remind us of the Good News. That Good News is that we have been saved and we can be changed, that we are free to enter into new relationships with God and with each other, that the ghosts of our past are just that, powerless spirits compared with the Spirit of Power that rules our lives.

Christmas and the start of a New Year can be a good time to think about things you want to change in your life, in your relationships with God and with others. It's a good time to think and pray about forgiveness, either getting it or giving it. It's a good time to work on your priorities and on giving the Good News a larger place in your heart. May the Good News of Christmas bless you and your families now and throughout the year. Merry Christmas and as Tiny Tim would say, God bless us every one.

Amen.