

The Power of the Small

Isaiah 11:1-9

4th Sunday in Advent

18th December 2011

Let me start off this morning by doing a little anecdotal research. How many have watched, or will watch, during this Christmas season Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*? What is your favourite version? The film starring Alastair Sim as Scrooge? Or how about the movie with Albert Finney or the TV adaptation with George C. Scott in the lead role? Or, maybe you like the musical starring Kelsey Grammer. Or, maybe your choice would be The Muppet Christmas Carol with Michael Caine. Or, perhaps your favourite would be the Italian version with Marcello Mastroianni. Whatever your taste, there is certainly a wide variety of choices because there are over 200 film and TV versions of this wonderful tale – not speak of stage versions and dramatised readings.¹

I must confess that one of my favourites is the 1983 Disney cartoon version. *Mickey's Christmas Carol*² where Scrooge is cast as a miserly Scot, Scrooge McDuck who sits at his quaint old office desk counting out his money? "Two Thousand Three Hundred and Fifty Two ... Two Thousand Three Hundred and Fifty Three".

Some people have asked me over the years if I am offended by the unfavourable depiction of this miserable reprobate as a tight-fisted old Scot. Of course, not, I say. I know a lot of miserable old Scots just like him. In fact, don't we have a bunch of old Scottish skin-flints just like him here in St. Paul's? Just joking, of course! Or, am I?

Actually, the fact that Scrooge can be depicted as an animal – and with a Scots accent, to boot – is a tribute to the enduring appeal of Dickens' timeless story. That it can be retold in this way, as a cartoon – and in so many other ways – says something about its eternal appeal.

What is the secret is of this Dickens' masterpiece? What has kept it ever-fresh over the nearly 170 years of its existence?³ Is it simply because the likes of Alastair Sim or George C. Scott – or even the Muppets – have given such sterling performances? Perhaps. But there are deeper reasons.

In his book *The Life and Times of Ebenezer Scrooge*, writer Paul Davis suggests that the reason for *A Christmas Carol's* enduring popularity lies in the way the story has been re-interpreted to meet the cultural needs of each successive age.⁴ In the first decade after publication, for instance, the public saw in Scrooge's rediscovered generosity proof that the inner goodness of humanity could not be destroyed by the ravaging social effects of the Industrial Revolution. Towards the end of the 19th century, in the years of religious awakening and evangelical fervour, Scrooge was portrayed as a pilgrim seeking the Christ-child. In the years just before World War I, the perception of *A Christmas Carol* changed once again becoming a fairy tale for children. This lasted until the Depression era when the

story took on yet another manifestation with Bob Cratchit becoming the symbol of the suffering of ordinary people at the hands of ruthless financiers such as Ebenezer Scrooge. In the 1960s, says Davis, the historic tale was interpreted in yet another way. Scrooge, by his change of heart, was now seen as a revolutionary figure, joining the flower children in the streets to celebrate their common humanity. The final stage is in the present time when hunger and homelessness bring the story full circle with the same conflict between selfishness and selflessness, between the haves and the have-nots, that inspired the original back in 1843. Aren't these the very same themes that the Occupy Protest movement has been highlighting over past months? Funny, isn't it, how the more things change, the more they remain the same!⁵

Now, Paul Davis might be right. The genius of *A Christmas Carol* might well be in its ability to recast itself, chameleon-like, for every changing age. But I personally think the answer is much more simple. It's not really what changes about Dicken's *A Christmas Carol* that keeps it ever-fresh. It's what stays the same. And that is the central message – which just so happens to be the essential message of the Christian Gospel – that human nature can be changed. That salvation is possible even for the most hardened of all human beings.

But I think even more so is the fact that the central message is one we know we need to hear in today's world: That human nature can be changed. That salvation is possible even for the most hardened of all human beings.

But even more. The continuing fascination of Dickens' masterpiece lies in the fact that human nature is so often changed in the most unexpected of ways. Through the unlikelyest of all people.

In *A Christmas Carol*, wasn't it the winsome Tiny Tim, the beloved little lame son of Bob Cratchit, who became the instrument of salvation for Ebenezer Scrooge? What could have been more surprising? Was it the force of the philosopher's logic that changed the miserly old skin-flint? Was it the persuasion of a dynamic preacher that converted the contemptible old cheapskate? Was it the threat of incarceration that transformed the mean old tyrant? No. None of these. But simply the sickly child of a humble clerk that worked the miracle of redemption in the life of Scrooge.

Here, then, is the ongoing allure of this wonderful story by Charles Dickens. It reminds us that, contrary to accepted wisdom, human nature can still be changed. By the least of all people.

But not only human nature, though. Dickens classic, by extension, tells us that the world itself can be changed by the smallest of the small.

As a child growing up, I always remember my mother saying, “There’s going to be a change in this house.” Whenever my sisters and I got into trouble, whenever things went wrong, whenever there was a catastrophe, she would invariably say, “There’s going to be a change in this house. And it’s going to start with you children.” The more I came to reflect on her saying in later life, the more I came to believe that this is also what God says to us, “There’s going to be a change in this world. Things are going to be different. And this change is going to happen through the smallest of the small.”

Isn’t this exactly what God tells the people of Israel over and over again, in the Old Testament? The world is going to be changed – and changed through the unlikely of all and the smallest of the small? The prophet Isaiah, for instance, has a vision of a new world-order brought about by the young, where there will be peace and harmony and, “The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.”⁶

Then, by coming to Bethlehem of Judaea as a child in a stable, in the presence of shepherds and wise men, at that first Christmas, God was as good as his promise. Through the unlikely of all people and the smallest of the small, he began to perform the most profound and far-reaching of all changes both in the human heart and the world at large.

We may, of course, often doubt what God has done through the Christ-child. With all the tragedy and evil in the world today, we may feel he has hardly scratched the surface. That the world needs to be changed much more radically. But just at the point where we begin to doubt and despair, just when we think that God has only made a symbolic gesture towards change through Jesus, suddenly we come once again across that wonderful passage by Dr. James Allan Francis, entitled “One Solitary Life” – words that remind us just how greatly that child of such humble, rustic beginnings has impacted the world:

“Here is a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another village. He worked in a carpenter shop until He was thirty. Then for three years he was an itinerant preacher.

“He never owned a home. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family. He never went to college. He never put his foot inside a big city. He never travelled two hundred miles from the place he was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but himself...

“While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied him. He was turned over to his enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed upon a cross between two thieves. While he was dying his executioners gambled for the only piece of property he had on earth – his coat. When he was dead, he was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

“Many long centuries have come and gone, and today

he is a centrepiece of the human race and leader of the column of progress.

“I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that were ever built; all the parliaments that ever sat and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as has this one solitary life.”⁷

Oh, may we, during this Advent time, have eyes to see what God has achieved in history through the unlikely of all and the smallest of the small. How he has changed the world – and is still changing it. And how he can change it even further, in ways we can hardly imagine, if we will just let him touch our hearts. If we will just let him cleanse us, heal us, forgive us and strengthen us. If we will just let him equip us to be the Christian people he wants us to be. So that he can work through us.

“Work through us? Through people of no importance or power like us?” you might ask, incredulously. Yes, certainly. People just like us. Because Christmas teaches us whenever God wants to achieve important things in this world of his, he works through people exactly like you and me – the unlikely of all and the smallest of the small.

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¹ Christmas Carol Adaptations, <http://en.wikipedia.org>

² *Mickey’s Christmas Carol*, Walt Disney Productions, 1983. Scrooge McDuck voice by English Canadian actor, Alan Young

³ Actually, *A Christmas Carol* was first published exactly 168 years ago this December – in 1843.

⁴ W.H. Auden describes this process as “the words of a dead man being modified in the life of the living”.

⁵ Paul Davis, *The Life and Times of Ebenezer Scrooge*, New Haven: Yale University Press, c1990

⁶ Isaiah 11:6

⁷ Dr. James Allan Francis, *The Real Jesus and Other Sermons* © 1926, Judson Press, Philadelphia, PA, (pp 123-124 “Arise Sir Knight”)