

Midnight Mass 2018

Charles Dickens's, *A Christmas Carol*, is 175 years old this month. Over the course of its long life, it has become so iconic, so often parodied and adapted and mimicked and quoted that even if we have never read the book, we probably know exactly what it's about.

We know the story of Ebenezer Scrooge, the bah-humbug- miser who despises Christmas, charity, the poor, and everything besides his own money. We know how he's visited first by the ghost of Jacob Marley, his dead business partner, and then by the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future and how as a result, he learns to love and celebrate the true meaning of Christmas.

We know about Scrooge's virtuous employee, Bob Cratchit, who asks nothing of Scrooge but to take Christmas Day off, and about his poorly son, Tiny Tim.

As Fred, the nephew, said to his uncle;

"There are many things from which I might have derived good, by which I have not profited, I dare say," returned the nephew. 'Christmas among the rest. But I am sure I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come round— apart from the veneration due to its sacred name and origin, if anything belonging to it can be apart from that—as a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time; the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys. And therefore, uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it has done me good, and will do me good; and I say, God bless it"

A lot of our Christmas mythology can be traced back to Charles Dickens and to Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. The contribution of Dickens, particularly in the Christmas Carol is immense and has largely founded a spirit of philanthropy, that surfaces every year at this time. Pop up charities like Crisis at Christmas has an amazing way of tearing at our heart strings as proved by our Parish Christmas lunch, that was attended by about thirty people and when all the materials for the lunch had been paid for, £185 was left to donate to Crisis at Christmas for their work this year.

Oh, that the crisis was only at Christmas! Last year 517 people died homeless on our streets and the level of violence towards rough sleepers is increasing year by year and it would appear that the Government is powerless to do anything about it. The situation will get worse as Universal benefits are fully rolled out

and homelessness will increase because rents are now not paid directly to the landlords but to the recipient who will have to balance rent amongst all the other demands of their disposable income after food and heating. Balance that against the payment of Winter Fuel Allowance without any form of means testing because it is cheaper to pay to all qualified. Yes, I know that one can opt to give it to charity but that is not the point.

Talking of charity could I, at this stage, tell you that our Christmas collections this Christmas will be given to charity, chiefly, the Food Bank and the Chatterbus, which help to alleviate local poverty. The Food Bank, so that families can eat, and the Chatterbus so that we can get people to Weybridge to sign on for their lawful entitlement. In the past we have heard stories of people walking to Weybridge to sign on and because they were late, by no fault of their own, were penalised and so they had no money and had to resort to the Food Bank and that is where the Chatterbus helps in helping them to find the help they need.

This week, the Bishop at Lambeth, the Rt Revd Tim Thornton, said that foodbanks were now part of everyday life — even for working families. He told the *Daily Mirror*: “A lot of people in work are also in poverty. Many foodbanks say they have a big queue at 5.30 p.m., when people are coming home from work.

“I’d love to give thanks for a foodbank winding up because it’s not needed. Many countries have industrialised foodbanks, institutionalised as part of the way things are. I’m really worried we are moving in that direction. Are we going to slip into it, saying: ‘This is just the way it is’?” The Foodbank in Cobham is feeding on average 50 people per week so goodness only knows what it is like in poorer areas.

At least 320,000 people are homeless in Britain, according to research by the housing charity Shelter. This amounts to a year-on-year increase of 13,000, a 4% rise, despite government pledges to tackle the crisis. The estimate suggests that nationally one in 200 people are homeless. Shelter says its figures, which include rough sleepers and people in temporary accommodation, are likely to be an underestimate of the problem as they do not capture people who experience “hidden” homelessness, such as sofa-surfers, and others living insecurely in sheds or cars, for example.

The problem is not a new one. Jesus was born in a stable, the child of a homeless couple. He was born in a country that was occupied by a foreign nation whose rule was harsh and tyrannical. The Holy family became refugees

as they fled from persecution by Herod as they fled to Egypt, itself ironic as it was from Egypt that the children of Israel fled to escape the excesses of Pharaoh.

So, as we sit here in a warm church, full of the joys of Christmas it does us no harm to reflect on the fact that there are those for whom it is not a merry time or that there is not, where they are, peace on earth and goodwill to all men.

Perhaps the time has come for us to think again about the world in which we live and the way our society is going. As we sit and watch our politicians engaging in petty, party political bickering over Brexit, the legislation that could bring in social reform is even more delayed. I sometimes wonder why we even bothered to have a referendum as it appears that our so-called representatives are going to disregard the will of the majority and follow their own opinions- I hesitate to use the word conscience!

It is sometimes in the face of pain, need, suffering and oppression that we see the face of God reflecting the situation on earth today and we cannot get away from the fact that this child, whose birth we celebrate today has transformed the world as indeed he will transform us, if we should allow him room in our hearts.

Perhaps we should leave the final word to Charles Dickens, as we reflect on our world and life this Christmas;

“It is a fair, even-handed, noble adjustment of things, that, while there is infection in disease and sorrow, there is nothing in the world so irresistibly contagious as laughter and good humour”.

My wish to you this Christmas is that it will be Happy, Blessed and above all, thought provoking. As Dickens reminds us

“Scrooge was better than his word He became as good a friend, as good a master, as good a man as the good old City knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough in the good old world.”

As Scrooge was transformed by his experience, may the same happen to us.

Amen.