

The crowds asked John the Baptist, "What should we do?" He said to them in reply, "Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none."

And that person should be Ebenezer Scrooge because as he is described in Charles Dickens's seasonal "A Christmas Carol": *The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shriveled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his lips blue; . . . A frosty rime was on his head, on his eyebrows, and his wiry chin. He carried his own low temperature always about with him; he iced his office at Christmas.* Indeed he was cold even beyond feeling either cold or heat – as the story continues: *External heat and cold had had little influence on Scrooge. No warmth could warm, no wintry weather chill him. No wind that blew was bitterer than he, no falling snow was more intent upon its purpose . . . But what did Scrooge care! It was the very thing he liked.*

Obviously this is hardly a biological description of Scrooge. I mean, even if his bodily temperature measured factually at 98.7 F, Dickens's *metaphorical* description is much more accurate. The chill became obvious to the two charitable men who came to his office requesting a Christmas donation for the poor. Scrooge inquired: *Are there no prisons? . . . workhouses? . . . The treadmill and the Poor Law are in full vigor then? . . . I'm very glad to hear it.* Nevertheless when the visitors asked, "What shall I put you down for?" "Nothing!" Scrooge replied. "You wish to be anonymous?" "I wish to be left alone," said Scrooge. Brrr.

Dickens is offering us a caricature of the materialist world which has arrived full blown in the commercialism of our own times in which, for example, while you are trying to read an Internet article on the sources of the Nile the screen is interrupted with almost frantic high tech gadget ads among others. Money in terms of budgets, celebrity salaries, deficits, inflation preoccupies the media.

While Dickens makes little mention (if at all) of the Gospel birth narratives, he does subtly suggest why this materialist chill has come over Scrooge and later generations. It's that scene where Scrooge on Christmas Eve returns to his gloomy suite of rooms to sit by his fireplace and sup upon his nightly gruel. The fireplace supplied a very low fire indeed – it was an old one *paved all around with quaint Dutch tiles, designed to illustrate the Scriptures. There were Cains and Abels, Pharaoh's daughters, Queens of Sheba, Angelic messengers descending upon clouds, Abrahams, Belshazzars, Apostles putting off to sea in butter-boats, hundreds of figures (images not dollar signs) to attract his thoughts . . .*

It summoned the attention of this man obsessed with modern accounting to those alternative accounts of biblical events and exemplary characters, of ancient episodes of faith, hope, justice, love, solidarity – things with which the Christmas season still confronts us – despite the commercial racket and music that celebrates snow and sleigh bells and chestnuts and raises excessive lighting displays that blind us to the modest candle light of old that once lit our way through winter darkness into a world of mystery.

**Geoff Wood**