

## The Liturgical Season of Advent/Christmas 2020

### *This is Your Story*

Way back in the 1950's there was a show called *This is Your Life* – hosted by Ralph Edwards. A surprised celebrity or someone in the audience is brought on stage. The host then brings out from behind the wings – one after the other – people from the surprised guest's past. There follow emotional reunions, embraces, reminiscences that delighted the program's audiences from 1952 to 1961.

The program inspired the writers of Sid Caesar's comedy show to do a parody of *This is Your Life* – under the title: *This is Your Story*. A real spoof! I happened to watch a replay of it a week ago. Sid Caesar, playing an anonymous member of the theater audience, is selected and brought up on stage – resisting every step of the way. Once subdued by Carl Reiner, who plays the host, out come old friends and relations, one by one, and what really doubles you up are the almost gymnastic gyrations of emotion that prevent Reiner from even managing the program. As the New Yorker Magazine put it: *That night nearly sixty years ago, the show produced what is probably the longest and loudest burst of laughter in the history of television.*

I bring this up because – more seriously – one's life is indeed a story of many an episode, events and people that, though forgotten, linger somewhere deep within one – waiting to rise as it were from the dead – to wake you up from the trance you are currently in. Time – Past, Present and Future – can be God's way of infiltrating your mind and heart. Time can be experienced as grace and not just the tick of a clock.

With that in mind I want to introduce you to Time – the time of your life – by way of Charles Dickens's story *A Christmas Carol* – whose telling comes round every December even as Advent comes round. It's about that old skinflint Ebenezer Scrooge

### *Ordinary Time*

Ordinarily we talk of time as a sequence of moments, hours, days, years – adding up one after the other. We speak of it and observe it as clock time – ticking away, drifting away behind us, as does the wake of ship – until it disappears beyond a distant horizon – gone forever. Not infrequently the

passage of such clock time will depress human beings who would like to stop the clock, hold on to the now – even as it slips through their fingers.

One of the more famous expressions of this depressing sense of time – in Shakespeare's tragic play - is spoken by Macbeth upon learning of his wife's death:

*Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day, / To the last syllable of recorded time; And all our yesterdays have lighted fools / The way to dusty death. . . . / Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player, / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage, / And then is heard no more. It is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing.*

But that's the opinion of Macbeth, no longer a man of faith but a brutal assassin deranged by illusions of greatness, ready to take time and space under his control – only to be confused by events beyond his control. So no wonder he thinks of time as a waste – signifying nothing.

#### *A Christmas Carol*

Dickens's story, on the other hand, deals with the passage of time differently - although not so Ebenezer Scrooge. He can't even think of time as anything but money. For him time means the pursuit of increased quantities of wealth - to no lasting end. In response to his nephew's invitation to Christmas dinner Scrooge replies: *What's Christmas time to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, but not an hour richer.*

His nephew thinks differently. He replies: . . . *I am sure I have always thought of Christmas time . . . – as a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time . . . when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, . . . 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.*

#### *Liturgical Time*

Both speak of that time of the year as *Christmas Time*. What does that mean? To call a span of time Advent Time or Christmas Time is to raise it beyond the monotony of clock time – to translate time into an experience

of God's grace, to give it a halo that both elevates and deepens our experience of time – as real time and not just empty, everyday time.

Indeed, if you are in any way conversant with the way we name the days and seasons of our liturgical year – what we are doing is claiming that time, from day to day from saint's day to saint's day, from season to season, from Advent to Christmas to Epiphany to Lent to Easter to Pentecost is eventful time – the recurring of biblical time: creation, patriarchal, exodus, arrivals accumulating – as into a promised land, a return from exile, prophetic, poetic, a time of birth, a time of miracles, of a death leading to a resurrection – a whole process of arrivals, advents, adventure that reveal who, where, why we are and where we are headed. In terms of our Church calendar, it is spread from year to year as a key to understanding your own life as a sequence of meaningful Past, Present and Future – going somewhere yet always arriving, if you are spiritually awake, somewhere wider and deeper than where you were. It is not lost time but time-regained year after year – incrementally, if consciously embraced. (And yet how many of us, unfamiliar with what we claim to believe, live mainly in secular, clock time, a sameness from year to year whose only evidence of any change is our aging . . . not wiser but older as far as what's truly true about life.)

*Let's first follow Time as dealt with in The Christmas Carol.*

#### *Scrooge stuck in Time*

As far as Ebenezer Scrooge is concerned, Time stopped for him long ago. We find him currently frozen in place. He practically lives in his accounting office with one employee whom Scrooge won't allow to put another coal on their low fire. Chill is his description: *tightfisted, sharp as flint, solitary as an oyster, cold. No warmth could warm, . . . no falling snow was more intent upon its purpose . . .* Anybody that bad off has to be on the verge of a crisis, a breakdown. We find him returned to his sitting room on Christmas Eve again by a low fire, the door double-locked, eating his gruel.

#### *The biblical fireplace*

And notice where he sits – before a fireplace that displays tiles that illustrate the Bible's characters and episodes. They depict Cains and Abels, Pharaoh's daughters, Angelic messengers, Abrahams and Apostles putting off in boats – the whole drama extending from Genesis to the

Apocalypse – the whole span and meaning of history as narrated by Hebrew poets. And he doesn't even notice the display – and he should because that too, that drama, is his history.

Contrary to the merely empty sense of time that Macbeth laments, biblical time is not forgettable, is meaningful from before and beyond and within each episode. Like an accordion. It issues from somewhere before the world begins and moves toward an ever appealing, ever summoning destiny. It makes sense of our existence. It offers a sequence of events to both remember and anticipate and - at every moment - taste – even as the poet John Keats could say upon reading a translation of Homer's epics: *Then felt I like some watcher of the skies / When a new planet swims into his ken . . .*

### *Marley*

But suddenly the biblical images on each tile of his fireplace are replaced by the face of Scrooge's old partner Marley, now dead these seven years – who, with a booming sound, passes through Scrooge's locked door trailing cash boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, . . . - symbolic of Time as only money! as Benjamin Franklin would define it. Marley reveals that Scrooge – on this Christmas Eve – will be visited by those three phases of Time – Past, Present and Future, to be summed up on Christmas day.

### *Christmas Past*

First there appears Past Time – Scrooge's Past. Memories of his boyhood and youthful days occur – of his school days, the joy his schoolmates felt when released to visit their homes at Christmas time – and of his own having been left behind at a desk in a now empty schoolroom – not an echo in the building, not a squeak even from the mice behind the walls. The recall of that boyhood loneliness makes this older Scrooge begin to cry. His past has always been a reservoir of forgotten emotions – and they have begun to return to him. The past has ever accumulated within him (and us) waiting to revive a forgotten, deeper understanding of ourselves and our world.

Then suddenly under the influence of Christmas Past he remembers himself as a young apprentice at a Christmas party staged by his cheerful employer Fezziwig, who gives everyone the day off, hosting a dinner and dance, clearing space until the warehouse was as snug, and warm, and dry,

and bright as a ball-room – and then came the fiddler, then the mince-pies and beer – and the dancing. And Scrooge felt his heart and his soul pulsating anew.

Then this scene passes - Scrooge beholds himself a young man. As Dickens describes him, *His face had not the harsh and rigid lines of later years, but it had begun to wear the signs of care and avarice.* And there was a fair young girl named Belle with tears in her eyes – about to end their engagement, as she says, *It matters little to you, very little. Another idol has displaced me . . . a golden one. You fear the world too much . . . I have seen your nobler aspirations fall off one by one, until the master passion, Gain, engages you.* He didn't at the time understand what she was saying. But, revisiting that moment, he does and pleads with his guide to show him no more.

What's happening here? Childhood and youthful experiences are revived that contributed to Scrooge's hardboiled decision to insure himself against any such pain again . . . by insulating himself within wealth and its pursuit . . . without feeling . . . time not to be wasted on feeling good . . . but now he sees what he has been missing, what could have been – the joy of his old schoolmates, the generosity of old Fezziwig, the love of a lost sweetheart – a meaningful life. But no longer past and irretrievable because by recalling such repressed experiences he has begun to re-experience them again in new ways – it's not too late. His truly human self is catching up with him.

### *Christmas Present*

Scrooge then falls asleep only to be awakened by the ringing of a bell and drawn out of bed by a strange light that seems to emanate from the next room. He enters and behold! he sees the Spirit of Christmas Present – clothed in green, wearing a holly wreath – with sparkling eyes, an open hand, a joyful voice – seated among an abundance of Christmas fare. Scrooge has spent his life turning everything into money – cold, hard cash. This Christmas Spirit – by conveying Scrooge to a Christmas season's market place restores to such commodities their true wealth – the wealth of nature itself. There were baskets of chestnuts, pears, apples, clustered into pyramids, piles of filberts, oranges and lemons, gold and silver fish in a bowl which despite their colder blood knew something special was going on as they went gasping round and round in slow, passionless, excitement.

The world not only abundantly nourishing but also colorful, of so infinite a number of shapes and tastes, worthy of an artist – and people of all sorts greeting each other and church steeples summoning them to celebrate the annual rebirth of God’s world - things Scrooge, so long buried amid numbers within his accounting office, could no longer imagine. But now he begins to recover that lost imagination, his lost soul.

From there Scrooge is conveyed to the family gatherings of his clerk Bob Cratchit and Scrooge’s nephew. Cratchit’s home is a poor one, their dinner meager but they summon up good cheer – even raise a toast to Scrooge. And Scrooge, touched by the presence of Cratchit’s crippled child Tim, is moved to wonder if the boy will live . . . a thought that wouldn’t have entered his mind the day before. And as for a subsequent visit to his nephew’s home, cheerful, full of fun - Scrooge will experience his nephew’s grace as he says of the old miser: *I am sorry for him; I couldn’t be angry with him if I tried. Who suffers from his ill whims! Himself, always.*

And thence Scrooge and the Spirit are off to a storm battered lighthouse, where its two occupants share their grog and wish each other a Merry Christmas – solitary yet warm in the midst of darkness, the elder striking up a sturdy song that was like a Gale itself.

In other words, Scrooge was exposed to a present world that despite the darkness of winter was alive with faith and hope and love – expressive of humanity, not as percentages, but as a family – enough to awaken in Scrooge his own lost longing for a sense of family, humanity as a universal family, awakening him to his loneliness.

Finally before the Spirit of Christmas Present departs Scrooge is confronted by two children, wretched, miserable. Scrooge asks who are they. The Spirit says, *This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both.* Scrooge, who initially would not contribute to a Christmas charity, has emerged from this journey through time far enough to ask, *Have they no refuge or resource?* And the Spirit echoes his own former response to such a question, namely: *Are there no prisons? No workhouses?* - a response Scrooge is by now too embarrassed to have spoken, having recovered something of the soul he forsook when he began in earlier years to bury his humanity.

### *Christmas Future*

There follows his awakening next to a visit from the Spirit of his Future – confronting Scrooge with the outcome of his selfish ways. To make it short, he sees in a rundown part of town a collection of ragpickers sorting out the possessions of a recent corpse – Scrooge’s corpse, who having died in all his isolation possesses nothing – all that he had greedily coveted dispersed to the four winds. The Spirit leads him to a graveyard and points to one grave. Scrooge gets the point. He pleads: *Spirit! hear me! I am not the man I was. I will not be the man I must have been but for this [intervention] . . . I will honor Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me . . . Oh, tell me I may sponge away the writing on this stone.* [The existential philosopher Martin Heidegger would have been so happy to hear that.]

### *Rebirth*

What happens next? You know the story. He wakes up from this journey through his past, present, and future – a recovered man. From the cynical, skeptical, heartless person he had become, he has now recovered, by way of his remembrance of the buried sensitive moments of his life, the authentic self he now resolves to be. Throughout this journey through the day to day flow of his existence Scrooge has recovered the person he was born to be, that we are all born to be. Which shows in his excitement as Christmas Day arrives. He feels like a child again, life commencing again upon a better foundation – so fresh that he declares, *I’m quite a baby . . . I don’t know what to do! I am as light as a feather . . . as merry as a schoolboy.* He has also become free with that money he once locked up in a strong box – buying a prize turkey for the Cratchit family, later surprising his nephew’s Christmas party.

So – what?

What does this narrative by Dickens tell us if not the essential narrative of all literature, great literature (even tragedies) as well as the simpler tales that human beings like to tell and listen to? It offers us an imagined, poetic way of reviewing the course of our own lives – with the advantage that such narratives *illuminate* our actual lives. They deliver us from a shallow, forgetful, preoccupied way of living – they clear up the blind spots, redirect us into less shallow thinking and behavior, deepen our sense of the why and whence and whither we go. Even a mere episode in some grand story can also become a parable, can direct our attention to what’s wrong

with us, what's right, what's true of us - personally. And what a wealth of such narratives have been relayed to us by prior generations who were blessed with such insight!

*Biblical/Liturgical Time; Advent/Arrival*

So also, in a more universal or "catholic" sense, our biblical drama can deepen our consciousness. From the Book of Genesis we meet ourselves as Adam and Eve daring to take a chance on eating that forbidden fruit and losing the bet - and yet in losing also winning insofar as horizons open up, life as in one way or another drawing us out of the infantile security of that nursery called the Garden of Eden.

We meet ourselves then as Cain and his descendants, ready to kill even while inventing music. We meet ourselves as Noah adrift upon chaotic waters, yet feeling responsible for all the creatures of this universe gathered two by two within his Ark.

We meet ourselves again as tower builders, ambitious to get on top of things to dominate, impose one language, one method of being, a technological way of speaking that leaves us babbling to each other, strangers to each other – and yet the story results in the outburst of a multitude of languages, so many ways to be eloquent, poets, orators, so many ways to say, "I love you."

Then you and I become Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Rachel, looking for a land of promise, taking detours, blind alleys, becoming enslaved in 9 to 5 routines, building pyramids, tombs, breaking loose in search of freedom, stalling along the way.

We become Gideon and Deborah, heroic; and Samson, foolish, tragic, yet wiser and prevailing in the end. We become David and Bathsheba whose sin results in Solomon the Wise. We become Isaiah, a poet with lips on fire, and Jeremiah who like Scrooge at first doesn't know what to say, only to hear God say: *See, I place my words in your mouth.* We become exiled to strange places where, as did the Jews of old, we begin at last to understand the world in wider and less dogmatic, globally influential ways.

An angel announces our birth, we look up out of a manger, we magically touch and heal people without even knowing it, we meet adversity only to rise again, we are Simon Peter, slow to understand, to catch on, but



eventually good at breaking out of prisons – the incarceration of our minds and hearts . . .

We are sometimes blown away as at Pentecost. We dine with Christ at Emmaus and get to know him better in the breaking of the bread, the breaking of our hearts.

Scripture as spread out over three cycles, the ABC's of our liturgical time, draws you within its stories and personalities, its sins and heroics, its healing word, (as does so much of literature in general) designed to lift you out of the narrowness of your self-understanding or what people think of you – into an authentic, gracious sense of yourself and the universe around you.

*Afterthought*

Don't miss this annual Advent opportunity to reinitiate your own advent, your own arrival out of your forgotten Past and even Present toward a more authentic Future self - with the help of traditions like Scrooge's conversion and more so by Scripture's own narration of your personal story. Christmas time and Advent time provide a chance to better know yourself and what your life is all about.

Postscript:

The poet Carol Penner from up in Manitoba, Canada has written a poem that offers us one way of understanding the birth at Christmas. It's title is: *God chooses face-time*

*We're always calling God.  
Where are you God?  
Why don't you pick up?  
The phone rings and rings,  
echoing in that heavenly chamber.  
We check the number,  
this has got to be right.  
Finally God's answering machine clicks in.  
We hear God's voice,  
"Why are you calling me?  
I'm standing right beside you."*