

Time to Change

I don't usually recommend films, but one that both Heather and I recently enjoyed was The Man Who Invented Christmas – the story of how Charles Dickens wrote A Christmas Carol – one of the most widely read and popular books ever written, even to this day.

A Christmas Carol was written in London in 1843, and published just a week before Christmas. It was an immediate best-seller and the first printing sold out within a few days.

What made that book so popular? Was it the accuracy of the social world that the book depicted – the poverty, the social injustice and callous indifference to the poor so prevalent at the time? Was it the supernatural intervention of Marley and the three ghosts into the life of a man who evaluated everything in terms of money? Was it the hope of redemption that even the worst of people can become the best of people?

You may remember the story. Old, irascible Ebenezer Scrooge is that miserly, mean-spirited businessman whose life passion was making and accumulating and hoarding money, lots of money, though he spent very

little, even on himself.

One Christmas Eve, exactly seven years to the day, that his business partner Jacob Marley had died, Scrooge was in his house all alone, as he always was; when he heard the sound of clanging chains. The sound grew louder and louder until a pale, sickly figure stood in his room. It was Jacob Marley, or should I say, Marley's Ghost wearing the chain he had forged in life – the chain of greed and selfishness and indifference to human suffering.

On this Christmas Eve Marley's Ghost is on a mission: to warn old Scrooge that his life was headed for the same fate that he now experienced. The Ghost laments to Scrooge his own failures: that he did not use more wisely the life that he was given.

“But you were always a good man of business, Jacob,” Scrooge replies.

“Business,”” cries the Ghost... Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence were all my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my

business!””(1)

Let me ask you a question: What’s your business? How would you characterize your life? What are you doing with the one and only life you will ever possess? Where is it now; and where is it going? There is urgency about this question because time is running out. In fact, there will come a time when there will be no more time. When the life we have lived will be over, and then we will stand before God and give an account for how we lived with what we had.

That’s why, as much as I have read and re-read A Christmas Carol, I can always bear to read it again. The story prods me to think about how I am using the limited time that I have on this earth.

Time is the one thing we can never get back. Once it is gone, it is gone forever. We can never regain yesterday, only anticipate tomorrow. I can lose my money, only to regain it again. I can lose a friend, only to make another friend. I can lose my job, only to find another job. But when I lose time, I lose it forever. I can never regain what I have lost. I can never repeat yesterday. I can never take back the hours and days that have gone before. Time is precious precisely because it can never

be repeated.

In Laurie Beth Jones' book, Jesus Life Coach, she tells about a man whose best friend was dying of cancer. "When it was nearly the end," she writes, "Joe finally got up the courage to ask Christine the question: 'What does it feel like to live each day knowing you are dying?' She raised herself up on one arm, and then asked him, 'Joe, what does it feel like to live each day pretending that you are not?'"

That's the question, isn't it? Do we live our lives as if we had all the time in the world? Do we ever think about the fact our time in this life is limited, and that what we have, should be used to make this world a better place for the people who will survive us?

As Christians we try to live as if every day counts. God could break into our world at any moment. We could die at any point. Jesus gives us good advice. He bids us: "Keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come."

There is a story of an eclipse that befell colonial New England. As the daylight sky was becoming darkened, panic fell in the Connecticut legislature that was in

session at the time. Several legislators moved for adjournment thinking it the end of the world. But one of them said, “Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. If it is the end of the world, I should choose to be found doing my duty. I move you, sir, that candles be brought and that we continue with our business.”(2)

I like that attitude. When Christ comes, we should be found making the most of the time we have on this earth – not squandering our time but living it to the fullest, in a way that glorifies God and makes the world a better place.

I will never forget Mother Teresa when she was visiting San Diego and suffered a heart attack. As she was recuperating in the hospital, the doctor said to her, “Mother, you are going to have to slow down and take it easy.” To which Mother Teresa replied, “In heaven I will slow down, but here on earth I still have work to do.”

Mother Teresa might have been a workaholic, but I like her attitude – give your all to God. Hold nothing back. Live as if you are expecting to meet Jesus at any moment – because some day you will.

Do you remember Admiral Nelson as he lay dying at the Battle of Trafalgar? His last words were said to be, “Thank God, I have done my duty.”

Could any of us have a nobler epitaph than that – to die doing our duty, making the most of the time that we have, giving ourselves to a cause greater than ourselves – a cause that demands nothing less than our best?

I am a proud graduate of Fordham and Georgetown – two Jesuit universities. The Jesuits taught me a valuable lesson about work. The motto of the Jesuits is “For the greater glory of God.” Notice: the motto is not simply “for the glory of God” but for the greater glory of God. In other words, we are to act for God’s glory in a way that stretches ourselves, makes the extra effort, does what needs to be done and then some. We are never to coast and take it easy. Mediocrity is never an option. Nothing less than our best efforts will suffice.

It makes sense, doesn’t it? After all, we pass through life only once, so shouldn’t we put all our efforts into making the world a better place by our passing through it – to leave behind a little more kindness, a little more decency, a little more compassion, especially for the

weakest and most vulnerable among us?

John D. Rockefeller was the richest man in the United States but at age 53 he was dying. He lost a great deal of weight; his hair on his head, his eyebrows and eyelashes had fallen out; he was confined to bed in terrible pain. Even though he was the world's richest billionaire, he could only digest milk and crackers. His body became shrunken like a mummy. As someone noted, "He could not sleep, would not smile, and nothing in life meant much to him at all." Doctors predicted that within a year he would be dead.

One night, however, as he struggled to fall asleep, Rockefeller came to grips with his life. He wasn't visited by ghosts like Scrooge, but he realized that he could take nothing with him into the next world. That night he had what might be called a "deathbed conversion" – only he didn't die. Instead he embarked on a new way of living. Rather than hoarding his money, he began to give it away. Establishing the Rockefeller Foundation, he channeled his fortune into hospitals, research, museums, libraries and mission work. His contributions eventually led to the discovery of penicillin as well as cures for malaria, tuberculosis and diphtheria.

At age 53 Rockefeller was given a year to live. Instead he recovered his health, and for the next part of his life until he died at age 97, he gave away as much money as he had earned – and became one of the greatest philanthropists of all time.

There is a deep Christian truth here: abundant life comes to us on the way to someone else. If we keep it to ourselves, we die. If we share it with others, we live. Salvation is always received by sharing it with others.

That's what happened with old Scrooge. One Christmas Eve he saw himself not as the man he was but as the man he could be – joyful, generous, kind, and compassionate, with a love for life and a heart for people. Indeed he became that man. Dickens writes, "He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man as the old good City knew..."

And Dickens concludes his story by saying: "...it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us! And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God Bless Us, Every One!"(3)

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Text – Mark 13:33-37

Advent 1, B

- 1. Charles Dickens, A Christmas Carol (A Signet Classic, 1984) 51.**
- 2. Lamar Williamson, Jr., Mark (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1983) 242.**
- 3. Dickens, A Christmas Carol, 138.**