

Diocese of the Western States

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A Pastoral Christmas Letter to the Good People of the Diocese of the Western States

Dear friends in the Lord,

I hope you will forgive me, but I don't want to talk about covid-19 anymore. Yes, I know we must take it seriously and take prudent steps to stop its spread, but I don't want fear to overcome the central message of Christmas. All disease and death are inherited from the Original Sin of our first parents when they ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were selfish, and we are selfish. Therefore, I want to talk about the Infant of Bethlehem who came among us to save us from ourselves – our greed, our selfishness, and our lack of Charity. So, bear with me, as I once again tell in the following worked-over Christmas message a story of an old fool who was saved by the grace of the Christ Child.

On December 19, 1843, Charles Dickens published a Victorian morality tale, *A Christmas Carol*, a ghost story in which a mean-spirited old miser is converted into a loving and generous man. The story was written because Dickens needed cash, but it quickly became the most popular of all his Christmas stories; it even helped England to reestablish the festivities and charitable observances which were being forgotten in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. The critics of the time both praised *A Christmas Carol* for its invention of unique personalities with their striking realism that rings true even today and also faulted it for its sentimentality that seemed to rob Christmas of its theological purpose. I disagree with the latter because (*I speak as a fool*) I believe that *A Christmas Carol* is a timeless exposition of what the coming of the Saviour ought to mean in our lives and how His coming ought to transform our lives.

Many of us have seen the story presented in small theatre productions or on screen. The central character is a bitter, old miser named Ebenezer Scrooge who – on a certain Christmas Eve - is working late with his overworked, unappreciated clerk, Bob Cratchit. It is seven years to the day that Scrooge's financial partner, Jacob Marley, died and Scrooge, who has devoted his life to the accumulation of wealth, is working Bob Cratchit till the last possible minute. Suddenly Scrooge's nephew, Fred, arrives. He wishes his uncle Merry Christmas and invites him to Christmas Dinner. Scrooge declared that Christmas was a fraud and dismissed his nephew with, "*Bah, Humbug!*" At the last minute, Scrooge let Bob Cratchit leave and with great irritation allowed him to take Christmas Day off, warning Cratchit not to be one minute late the next day.

On his way home, Scrooge callously rejects the charitable request of two men raising funds for the poor. Once home, he has a series of dreams. In the first, the ghost of Marley, dragging and clanging his heavy chains, warned Scrooge that, if he did not change his ways, he too would walk the earth eternally after death, invisible to mankind, burdened with chains he forged for himself by his callous lack of compassion, and forced to witness the misery and suffering which he could have ameliorated in his lifetime. Then he told Scrooge that he would be visited by three more ghosts who would help save him from his own fate.

First, the *Ghost of Christmas Past* led Scrooge on a journey through some of his past Christmases. He saw the kindness of his late sister Fan, who had intervened to rescue him from lonely exile at boarding school and he felt regret about how brusquely he had just that evening treated her son, Fred. They revisited a merry Christmas party given by Fezziwig, Scrooge's kindly apprentice-master, and Scrooge again felt guilt, this time because of his mistreatment of Bob Cratchit. Finally, he was reminded how his love of money lost him the love of his life, his neglected fiancé Belle, and all the subsequent regret that followed.

In the next dream, the *Ghost of Christmas Present*, a genial ghost in a coat lined with green fur, took him through the streets of London and they saw ordinary people, even the poor, celebrating in spite of their poverty. The ghost then took him to the Cratchit home where Scrooge witnessed the meager but heartfelt and loving celebrations of the Cratchit family. Scrooge was strangely touched when he saw Bob Cratchit's invalided son, Tiny Tim, a loving child whose early death the ghost prophesied - unless circumstances were changed. Scrooge was made even guiltier when Bob Cratchit reluctantly toasted his employer Scrooge for making even this poor Christmas celebration possible.

In his third dream, the *Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come* appeared, robed in black never speaking, its body entirely hidden except for one pointing finger, its most horrifying feature. He terrified Scrooge with visions of the Cratchit household in mourning over the loss of Tiny Tim and portended Scrooge's own death; a death that saddened nobody; a death in which his corpse and home were robbed by his ghoulish servants. Scrooge then broke down sobbing and was told by the ghost whose face he could not see that these things could be avoided only if he would change.

In theological symbolism, I hope we understand that Ebenezer Scrooge represents humanity's existential predicament, the ongoing battle with self-centeredness inherited from our first parents. In short, Scrooge was isolated and alone; he tried to substitute material wealth (his golden apple) for immortality; and so, he believed that life had no meaning beyond the self. When his friend Marley and the three ghosts appeared to him, all three of these lies, alienation from others, the joy of material wealth and love of self, were unmasked as false and empty. Scrooge realized that we are not alone in the world and that we cannot substitute love of things or the worship of self for the love of our neighbor. When I keep repeating that Jesus was born to save us from ourselves, I mean exactly this; that He was born to teach us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

The *Ghost of Christmas Past* showed Scrooge that his selfishness was unfounded and hypocritical because his own sister and his apprentice-master had both been kind to him and yet he claimed that good will toward men was of no value whatsoever. The *Ghost of Christmas Present* showed Scrooge that we cannot live in selfish isolation; that we have brothers and sisters who need us; and that we have no right to withhold our love from them. Finally, the *Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come* showed Scrooge the damage we do when we withhold our love and compassion from others. [That was as true in Dickens' day as it is today!] Scrooge learned the painful reality that his neglect and abuse of Bob Cratchit would hurt all the more because its effects were not limited to just Bob Cratchit; rather, it would be Cratchit's invalided son and family who would suffer the most – not to mention all the clients and people Scrooge had cheated in his unscrupulous business dealings. And most profoundly Scrooge was taught Christian charity when Cratchit, although unwilling, thanked God for even an almost sadistic employer such as Scrooge. Cratchit showed Scrooge gratitude.

Yes, that gratitude (hard as it was to summon) was probably the most profound example in the entire story of how Jesus came to save us from ourselves. **This is the message of Christmas.** And without this message fulfilled, all our holiness is a mockery of God. In *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge saved himself by heeding the three ghosts and by doing a complete about face. He anonymously sent the Cratchits the largest turkey in the butcher's shop, met the charity workers to pledge an unspecified but impressive amount of money, and spent Christmas Day with his nephew Fred and his wife. And on the day after Christmas, when Bob Cratchit arrived to work late, he pretended to be his old mean-spirited self for a short time, until he broke down and told Cratchit that he had become a new person. Scrooge's transformation was complete when he assisted Cratchit and his family, became an adopted uncle to Tiny Tim, and gained a reputation throughout London as a kind and generous man; finally, the tale ends with words about Ebenezer Scrooge that would be a fitting tribute to anyone...*"and it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge."*

So, my friends, how will we meet the existential crisis of daily living and the tug of secularism that surrounds us? Indeed, *A Christmas Carol* is a Victorian Morality Play which reflects an eternal truth; that love transcends heaven and earth; that love helps us to see the needs of our brothers and sisters; that love for our brothers and sisters proves our love for God. Jacob Marley teaches us that an unhappy fate awaits the unlovable. (But just maybe he is only in a kind of purgatory working out salvation in a mysterious way as he tries to help save Scrooge – just a thought about the mystery of Divine Providence; don't send me to the stake just yet!) Fan and Fezziwig teach us that our good deeds of love and compassion will bear fruit in God's kingdom long after we die. Fred teaches us the joy of reaching out to those who are in need of love; Bob Cratchit teaches us to love those who are not lovable; and Scrooge teaches us that anyone by God's grace can be saved.

During Christmastide, I make it a practice to watch some of the better renditions of *A Christmas Carol*. (Yes, I am a unrepentant sentimentalist!) It should come as no surprise that the older versions are the least secular and my favorite is still the 1938 version with Reginald Owen, Leo G. Carroll, and Gene Lockhart with his wife Kathleen Lockhart who play the Mr. and Mrs. Cratchit. The singing of *O Come All Ye Faithful* in the parish church is truly heartwarming in its role in the redeeming of Scrooge. And so, I give you these sentimental words as my Christmas present and I hope you might watch or read *A Christmas Carol*.

But I cannot conclude without a final thought. It is Tiny Tim who catches most the spirit of my gift. When Tim and his father have returned home from church on Christmas Day, Mrs. Cratchit asks her husband, "And how did little Tim behave?" "As good as gold," said Bob, "and better. Somehow, he gets thoughtful, sitting by himself so much, and thinks the strangest things you ever heard. He told me, coming home, that he hoped the people saw him in the church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant to them to remember upon Christmas Day, who made lame beggars walk, and blind men see."

May you have a blessed and merry Christmas, my dear friends.

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Postscriptum, Father Britton favors the 1951 version. Try it as well.