

SERMON, ST JOHN'S CHRISTMAS

Long before I had ever heard of Charles Dickens and his famous version of *A Christmas Carol*, I was steeped in Mr. Magoo's much more sophisticated animated version of the classic tale. One of the first feature-length cartoons made for TV, it first aired on NBC in the 1962 Christmas season and became a mainstay of the holiday for every American kid raised in the 60's and beyond. In the days when we all had to rely on scheduled programming, it was as enthusiastically anticipated each year as the annual Thanksgiving airing of *The Wizard of Oz*. Jim Backus, whose classy repertoire included the role of Thurston Howell III on *Gilligan's Island*, was the voice of Mr. Magoo, the bumbling near-sighted old fool who plays the miser Ebenezer Scrooge. It came as quite a shock to learn that the Mr. Magoo animated version was based on a great English classic by Dickens! I was a pretty nerdy child, who actually appreciated the classics, possibly due to the influence of my English immigrant parents who felt culturally alienated in the Los Angeles of the 1960s. Still, I was at the same time a kid raised on network TV in Los Angeles in the same decade and it was tough reconciling Magoo with the finely wrought Victorian English of Dickens' actual work, which my mother bought for me and insisted that I read it. "It was good," she said, "That I should know the **real** thing," that she so enjoyed when she was a child in those terrible, dark, days before the television.

And so, that great story, in its Magoo version, in its original novella form published in 1843, and in its numerous film versions (first in 1901!), was early emblazoned in my memory and has remained for me a tale that beautifully speaks to the heart and soul of this great festival of Christmas. And you all, I'm sure, know how it goes: Scrooge is a nasty old miser who despises Christmas, refuses a dinner invitation from his nephew Fred, turns away two men who seek donations for the relief of the poor and grudgingly allows his clerk, Bob Cratchit to have Christmas Day off work. His equally stingy former business partner, Jacob Marley, who'd been dead for 7 years, comes to Scrooge as a ghost in the night entwined with heavy chains and money boxes representing his life on earth. He tells Scrooge that he will be visited by three ghosts and if he doesn't heed what they have to say, will suffer a worse fate than him. The Ghost of Christmas Past, of course, reminds Scrooge of his unhappy childhood and many regrets of having chosen the path of self rather than giving himself to others in love and generosity. The Ghost of Christmas Present takes him to the Christmas celebrations in Bob Cratchit's poor home where he sees Bob's son Tiny Tim, who is very sick, and learns that the sweet child will die unless he gets the help he needs. And finally, of course, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, shows Scrooge a future Christmas Day featuring the death of a man disliked by all, whose possessions are sold by his charwoman, laundress and undertaker and whose death is celebrated by those relieved from the burden of debt to him. Scrooge wants to know if tenderness accompanies **any** death and the Ghost takes him to the overwhelmingly tragic scene in Bob Cratchit's home where the family grieves over the death of Tiny Tim. Finally, he is shown his own grave, forlorn, neglected and forgotten and Scrooge weeps and declares that he will change his ways. We're familiar with the rest: Scrooge is transformed into a generous-hearted soul, gives to charity, sends a gorgeous turkey to Bob Cratchit's family and renews his relationship with his nephew Fred.

Commentators characterize *A Christmas Carol* as a classic allegory of Christian redemption. It is, indeed, a story of sin and redemption, of a man whose change of heart is a transformation from darkness to light, from death to life. More profoundly, however, it can be viewed as a parable of **generosity** and, as such, it takes us to the core meaning of this most glorious festival. Scrooge's cardinal sin is his miserliness, his inability to give of either his riches or of himself - in stark contrast to the infinite generosity of God. The God revealed to us in Scripture is by nature self-giving, even self-emptying. The very act of creation was a pouring out of God's loving nature, a sacrifice of stunning proportions, which did not occur once and for all at the moment of the Big Bang, but never ceases as the Spirit of God continues to unfold new and ever changing wonders in this exquisite, mind-boggling universe. God's generosity is revealed in pouring out his love and care for this universe and in demonstrating his grace and love to his people. Above all, God demonstrates his infinite generosity through Christianity's most outrageous and scandalous claim: that this child born of the poorest of the poor, among an obscure people, in an unimportant village in a remote corner of the Roman Empire is God Himself. The Christian belief in this stunning humility of God is both our faith's most ridiculous claim and its glory, for it is both a stumbling block for those who can't get beyond its absurdity and a means of grace for those who are touched by the tenderness of a God willing to be born among the likes of us.

It is no wonder, then, that the image of the Virgin and Child is among humankind's most beloved artistic expressions: Byzantine icons, Medieval frescoes, Renaissance paintings representing the cream of artistic achievement. Here we see the supreme generosity of God and celebrate the glorious truth that if God is present in the Infant of Bethlehem, God is present in **us**, God is reflected in the face of our sisters and brothers – indeed, all creation is shot through with divinity. This is what Christians call the “Incarnation”, which really means “enfleshment,” the means by which God is “enfleshed” in all things. And if we understand that God is, indeed, incarnate, then we shall view the world through a new lens and we shall love creation and all creatures as truly divine. As imitators of the life of Christ, who supremely demonstrated the perfection of God's love, we shall become as generous in our love as God is. Jesus teaches that to follow him we must take up our cross, but truly we can also say that he follows us by going to his Cross. You see, the claims of incarnation don't stop at the beautiful image of the Madonna and Child, but continue to the Cross, where God's supreme generosity is exhibited in the truth that in suffering and death he shares in all that it means to be human. Consider this: by virtue of the Incarnation, God is present with you and me on every cross that we bear right up until that final one. Easter exquisitely bookends Christmas because it demonstrates that Resurrection means that the God who is enfleshed in us loves us through even death itself to victory.

Who would have thought that Mr. Magoo's parable of generosity in *A Christmas Carol* could have such cosmic dimensions? The joy of Christmas is in giving – we all know that, of course, but we miss the point unless we see all giving as signs of God's own generous heart and that we only become who we are meant to be, when like him, we give ourselves to one another in love. God is with us, Emmanuel, enfleshed among us, and we are true to who we are when we are with, and for, one another. A Blessed Christmas to you all!!