

Title: Christmas reflections 2011

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In John's theology and imagery- there are reasons that he uses light and dark- but this is not a night for theology, this is a night for wonder. And for that, we have Charles Dickens to thank. I know that sounds strange- but in England, and to a lesser degree here in America. Christmas was not a big deal- a holiday that was in decline, with little or no public notice. Actually, in England it was outlawed for a time. – for good reason. In the 16th and 17th Centuries Christmas had devolved into an excuse for public drunkenness, over the top licentiousness and even mob violence- think Mardi grass on steroids without any cops to keep things in check and you get the idea. Church of England leaders railed against this- the Rev. Henry Bourne of Newcastle mourned that Christmas had become, " a pretense for Drunkenness, and rioting, and wantonness....". So when the Puritans took over under Cromwell , being good Puritans they didn't do anything that wasn't in the Bible- they outlawed public Christmas celebrations. Take that Ebenezer Scrooge!

But in the 18th Century the Industrial Revolution was in full swing. England became even more a stratified society, working class and ruling class- with the urban ghettos swarming with those working in miserable conditions. As so often happens in stratified societies, those on the top look down on those in the bottom, feeling that their lot was somehow God's will- thereby relieving them of any responsibility to help. Yeah, I know- weird. Church was for the middle and upper class, the rest could go hang.

This was the world that Charles Dickens was born into- the second of 8 kids, his early life reflected much of what he described as Bob Cratchit's family," *they were not a handsome family; they were not well dressed; their shoes were far from being waterproof... But they were happy, grateful, pleased with one another and contented with the time...*" But then disaster struck and his father was thrown into debtor's prison. (another strange idea of the time, if you didn't pay on time you could be thrown in jail- live at your own expense and held there till everyone was paid off- don't tell the Visa Mastercard people! Charles was sent to work in a shoe blackening factory making

labels in rat infested, filthy conditions- there is a reason that the poor figure so much in his stories- it was his life!

By 1843 he had done pretty well for himself- he was reasonably successful, supporting his own family, his parents and a sibling or 2- but the plight of the poor rankled him. O yes, he was part of those charities that raise money- just like the 2 portly gentlemen who call on Scrooge- but he wanted to do more, influence more- so he resolved to write a pamphlet that evolved into the Christmas Carol- and he succeeded beyond his wildest imagination.

His genius creation was Ebenezer Scrooge. Ebenezer is a Hebrew word- it means stone of remembrance. The Hebrews were commanded every now and then to set up a pile of rocks as a memorial to what God has done. And Scrooge? Scrooge is derived from an old English word- scruz or scrouge- meaning to press or squeeze- and that is Scrooge's character, isn't it? Squeezing every penny, squeezing the joy out of life, squeezing till there is nothing left but a dried out husk of a man. For Dickens, the wonder of Christmas starts with remembering where we have been- for how can we be thankful for what we have now? How can we appreciate light without first knowing the dark?

So he paints a picture of an embittered old man, who was not always that way. In heartbreaking detail we are introduced to a young boy who had been sent away to boarding school and forgotten- the only kid left to rot there over the Christmas break. We are told that he father used to be cruel and his mother, presumably dead- for she is out of the picture. There was a sister who loved him, but he didn't get to spend time with her. And the one time he did allow himself to fall in love, that failed too- because, in his desire to never again be insecure- he drove away the only one who ever loved him.

[Scrooge says,] "There is nothing on which [the world] is so hard as poverty; and there is nothing it professes to condemn with such severity as the pursuit of wealth!"

"You fear the world too much," she answered, gently. "All your other hopes have merged into the hope of being beyond the chance of its sordid reproach. I have seen your nobler aspirations fall off one by one, until the master-passion, Gain, engrosses you. Have I not?"

Bitter- those one thing he feared most of all, turned the one he loved away and because of that he turned away from love- becoming eventually the picture of bitter living death that we call Scrooge.

But wonder of wonder- Death is not the end. Dickens open with death, "*There was no doubt that Marley was dead. This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come from the story I am about to relate...* And what follows is the visits of Marley his only friend in the world, and the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present and Christmas Yet To Be. But my favorite part is the end- for we see Scrooge redeemed, able to love, able to share, finally able to be the best version of himself that he could possibly be. *He became as good a friend, as good a master and as good a man as the old city knew....Some laughed to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh.. for he was wise enough to know that nothing ever happened for good as which some people did not have their fill of laughter at the outset... and knowing that such as these would be blind anyway.... His own heart laughed and that was quite enough for him.*

Christmas is a time of wonder, a time of new beginnings, a time for counting our blessings and holding those close in our hearts close in our arms. The memorial stone of Scrooge demonstrates what the Gospel has always demonstrated- that redemption is never for just one soul, but for the all the souls the redeemed one comes in contact with. All of this is made possible by the One whose birth we celebrate tomorrow- but that is tomorrow and theology is not for tonight, tonight is for wonder, love and holding the ones we hold dear close to our hearts. Let us follow into the Light- and bear witness to the Light and be used by the Light to bless our world

God Bless us every one.