

Over 200 versions of Charles Dickens’ classic story have been produced: tv, radio, opera, plays, readings, and all the movies...from my favorite with Alistair Sims in 1951 to George C. Scott to the Muppets to adaptations with Bill Murray.

There’s a new movie out this year titled “The Man Who Invented Christmas.” It’s an imaginative story about Charles Dickens and the writing of “*A Christmas Carol*.”

Now, I daresay that God might have had a bit more to do with the invention of Christmas than Charles Dickens; in fact, John says as much, “In the beginning was the Word...”

But if we’re talking about traditions and rituals and what we know as the spirit of Christmas, then yes, Charles Dickens can make a claim to that.

Because an important aspect of *A Christmas Carol* is its distinctly modern view of Christmas, less concerned with solemn religious ceremony and defined by more joyous traditions: the sharing of gifts, festive celebrations, goodwill and generosity.

Now the book is divided into five sections, labeled as Staves in reference to the musical notation. A Christmas carol, after all, is a song.

But have you ever asked yourself, “Just what are the words to this Christmas Carol?”

I just saw that a new musical based on *A Christmas Carol* is being produced. The name? “Humbug!”

That’s the refrain of Ebenezer Scrooge throughout the story: “Bah, humbug!”

It helps to understand the story as we watch the movie that Dickens was a Christian writer and his writings deliver a powerful and brilliant social commentary.

When *A Christmas Carol* was published in 1843 the industrial revolution was in full swing.

Urban areas, the cities, were growing with a surplus population of unemployed refugees from the farms. Large landowners had bought or seized their small, rural communal fields and these displaced families had emigrated to the cities.

That was made to order for the factories which required large numbers of workers concentrated into small geographic areas.

On top of that, machine made products were replacing products which had for centuries had been homemade by craftspeople working in small shops.

Traditional ways of doing business were being left behind in favor of the more competitive methods of the new age.

Scrooge’s first employer, Mr. Fezziwig, was unable to adjust to these changes and went out of business.

Scrooge, however, quickly and richly, adapted to the new environment but lost his soul in the process.

For one thing, Scrooge's “Bah, humbug” is not merely the expression of an unfortunate personality trait. Scrooge is primarily a business person, and the drive for profit has become for him an addiction.

Making money superseded any other motive in his personality. He focused solely on what today we refer to as the bottom line, his corporate profits, regardless of the human and social cost.

Scrooge says, "I don't make merry myself at Christmas, and I can't afford to make idle people merry."

“Bah, humbug!”

On the personal level Scrooge is indifferent to the humanity of his employee, Bob Cratchit, who exists for him only as a means to an end.

He exploits Cratchit as much as he can, going so far as to save a few pennies on coal while Cratchit shivers and freezes in the next room.

Cratchit's financial dependence on Scrooge makes him and his family vulnerable to abuse, including the use of terror in threats of “You’re fired!” on the slightest whim.

On the social level Scrooge rejects an appeal for charity for the poor and the destitute (like the biblical widows and orphans).

In an encounter with two gentlemen asking for donations to a charitable cause, Scrooge suggests that the poor belong either in prison or in the workhouse.

When told that many would rather die than go to either place, he replies, "If they would rather die, they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population."

There was little help for the poor in Dickens' time. People who couldn't pay their debts were thrown into debtor's prison or abandoned on the streets to starve or put into “poor houses”.

Many prominent politicians and economic theorists attempted to justify these conditions with arguments designed to de-legitimize the rights of the underclass, to devalue them as people... a move to restrict the ability of the poor to fully participate in all that life had to offer.

Education was denied to them because even a little learning would make the Poor discontented with their condition and begin to question it.

Note that in the American South of the same time period, it was illegal to teach a slave to read or write, for the same reason.

Remember the scene where the Ghost of Christmas Present spreads open his robe and exposes two children named “Want” and “Ignorance”.

Those children symbolize the harsh reality, the living result of the prejudicial neglect of Ebenezer Scrooge's “Bah, humbug” life: a disconnected Victorian upper class that is shown to be abusive, heartless, and fundamentally inhuman.

Into that dark world; and be sure to note that it is in the darkness Ebenezer Scrooge receives his messengers, the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Yet to Come.

All attempt to teach him new words to a Christmas carol, new words that would mean life for him, life for others.

Actually, they are old words that had been written down centuries before in the gospel of John: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

John gives us a messenger, too: John, the son of Zechariah; it had been 300 years since Israel had heard from a prophet of God, and then John shows up.

This was John the Baptist, and this messenger preached that whether you were a Jew or a Gentile, you were as sinful as the next guy, and you better repent or you would be cut down at the roots like a tree, and thrown into the eternal fire.

And when people asked John how they should live this repentance and forgiveness, he gave them a word that would shine in their darkness and means life for the world.

He told people to share their clothing and food with the poor. He insisted tax collectors should stop cheating people by overcharging them.

He demanded that soldiers stop bullying people and extorting money from those who were vulnerable - a new old message of justice and love, an offering pleasing to the Lord.

People began to think John was the Messiah they'd been hearing about, but John quickly pointed out that he was just the messenger called by God to prepare the world for the day of the Lord.

His message was that the great and terrible day of the Lord wouldn't be the end of the world, it would be the coming of the light into the world, a new day, a new life.

Instead of getting ready to meet the end of our earthly existence, we would be getting ready to meet God!

There's a huge difference between thinking the world is going to be destroyed and thinking that the old world - to paraphrase John Dominic Crossan: "(A world where) justice without love ends in brutality (and where) love without justice ends in banality."

This old world is replaced and a new world will be born, where all flesh shall see the salvation of God, in the flesh; again to paraphrase John Dominic Crossan: where "Justice is the body of love, and love is the soul of justice; where justice is the flesh of love, and love is the spirit of justice."

What Scrooge had to learn, expressed early in the story by his nephew, is something we all need to understand.

The spirit of Christmas, says the nephew, teaches men and women "to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys."

It is the essence of Tiny Tim's benediction as the story ends: God bless us, everyone!

These are the words Scrooge begins to sing! He has literally seen the light of a new day! He sees the real nature of his own behavior and is able to identify with the pain of another human being.

His awakened compassion, awakened to the light of Christmas day, now assumes a cosmic dimension, and he can begin to act in humility and love towards his fellow human beings.

These are the words to a Christmas carol for those people frustrated by illness and disability, out of sorts with themselves, angry with others, afraid of what tomorrow may bring.

"God bless us, everyone!"

These are the words to a Christmas carol for people without faith in anything, whose lives are empty of meaning, who have lost all hope, who can see no point in going on any further.

These are the words to a Christmas carol for people whose faith has been shaken by the unfairness, by the cruelties of this world, by corruption and dishonesty, by how fast things change and they simply couldn't keep up.

"God bless us, everyone!"

These are the words to a Christmas carol for people whose hope has been worn out by endless despair, the horror of war, the bitterness of hatred, the failure of dreams on which they had their hearts set on.

At Advent, we don't skirt the harsh realities of our dark sinful world. Instead, we sing the Christmas good news that God loves the world so much that God sent Jesus into our darkness to give us the light for living a new day.

In Jesus, the living word of the original Christmas carol:

- God has sent divine light into a dark world.
- God has sent divine healing into a hurting world.
- God has sent divine love into a hateful world.
- God has sent self-sacrificial generosity into a self-indulgent and greedy world.
- God has sent divine truth into a world hooked on lies.
- And God has sent divine hope into a world overwhelmed by despair.

And we sing our Christmas carol, "God bless us, everyone!"

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.