

Keeping Christmas Well
Homily for Christmas Day 2017

One of Charles Dicken's most famous protagonist is from his novel *A Christmas Carol*. At the novel's outset we read the essence of Ebenezer Scrooge's character, when Dicken's writes:

Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster.

Scrooge embodies St. Augustine's concise definition of sin: "*Incurvatus in se*" which means: a life lived "inward" for oneself rather than "outward" for God and others. Scrooge was a man who was consumed by himself and in turn wanted to consume others and make their lives as miserable as his own.

When his nephew comes to visit and greets him with a "Merry Christmas" the hardened man replies:

"Every idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips, should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart. He should!"

As the novel unfolds over a very disturbed sleep of Christmas Eve, Scrooge is visited by the Ghosts of Christmas past, present and future. During these hours a profound conversion happens in the life of Ebenezer and when Christmas morning dawns, Dicken's captures the change with this most vivid prose:

"I don't know what to do!" cried Scrooge, laughing and crying in the same breath; "I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel, I am as merry as a schoolboy. I am as giddy as a drunken man. A merry Christmas to everybody! A happy New Year to all the world. Hallo here! Whoop! Hallo!"

A few paragraphs later we go on to read:

Really, for a man who had been out of practice for so many years, it was a splendid laugh, a most illustrious laugh. The father of a long, long line of brilliant laughs! "I don't know what day of the month it is!" said Scrooge. "I don't know how long I've been among the Spirits. I don't know anything. I'm quite a baby. Never mind. I don't care. I'd rather be a baby. Hallo! Whoop! Hallo here!"

Through that long night the Spirits had been to Scrooge what the messenger of Isaiah had been many centuries earlier.

*How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of him who brings good tidings,
who publishes peace, who brings good tidings of good,*

As Scrooge examined his conscience by the assistance of those Ghosts good tidings of good had been proclaimed to him so that something else Isaiah declared became evident in Ebenezer's life on Christmas Day.

*Break forth together into singing,
you waste places of Jerusalem;*

The waste places of a life that had been turned in on itself became an oasis of joy and purpose on that Christmas morn as Scrooge began to live his life outwards towards God and others. A Christmas Carol ends with these words:

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!

To keep Christmas well is Dicken's invitation to each of us and it is the invitation of the Church on this day when we read the Prologue to John's Gospel. For here is a text even more famous than A Christmas Carol. A text we always read on Christmas Day because of its invitation to keep Christmas well.

To keep Christmas well means that like Ebenezer Scrooge we allow for the Holy Spirit of Jesus to touch our souls.

Scrooge epitomizes what this means. From a life lived "*Incurvatus in se*" turned in on itself he becomes one who truly reflects what it means to be made in God's image. Why is that? To answer let me quote this verse from John:

"And the Word became flesh and lived among us"

The word actually used in the Greek for "became flesh" would be better translated: "The word *tabernacled* among us".

He pitched his tent among us so that he came to dwell with us as man. He knows what it's like to be fully human. He knows what it's like to experience everything we experience as human beings with the exception of sin. He is like us in all things but sin. God loves us so much that he wants to be with us, he wants to tabernacle with us, not only in the incarnation, but also in the Eucharist as well. What does Christ do? When he becomes man, he suffers, dies, and rises again, but then he doesn't depart, he doesn't leave us behind, he remains with us in the tabernacle. He remains with us in the Eucharist, because that's who he is. As Matthew said, he is "God with us." And that is the great mystery and the truth of Christmas Day.

But here is what St. John wants us to understand. To Keep Christmas well requires something of us.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12 But to all

who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

We can live out the days of our life without discovering that Jesus is truly among us. In his beautiful poetry St. John wants us to understand that when we receive Jesus we are born of God. And when such a birth happens we truly appropriate the Sacrament of our Baptism.

With the anointing that happens before baptism the Minister of the sacrament says the Prayer of Exorcism:

Almighty and ever-living God, you sent your only Son into the world to cast out the power of Satan, spirit of evil, to rescue man from the kingdom of darkness, and bring him into the splendor of your kingdom of light. We pray for this child: set him (her) free from original sin, make him (her) a temple of your glory, and send your Holy Spirit to dwell with him (her). We ask this through Christ our Lord.

As we mature we are called to cooperate with the Grace made real in our baptism so that just as this Tabernacle is a Temple for Jesus' Glory, you are I are to be living tabernacles who know we are sons and daughters who have been born of God. When we receive Jesus, day by day he delivers us from a life lived "inward" for oneself so we can be liberated to live "outward" for God and others.

Charles Dickens story is a Christmas Classic because it expresses in a narrative form what St. John tells us poetically.

Because of Christmas Jesus gave power to become children of God.

I invite you to watch the movie or read a Christmas Carol over the Twelve Days of Christmas and so meditate on the meaning of the Nativity of Jesus Christ so that it can be said more fully of you and me:

It was always said of those people at St. Peter's, Calgary, that they knew how to keep Christmas well.