

The Gift of New Life

There is a scene in Charles Dickens' "Christmas Carol", which always tugs at my heart-strings, when I read it or see it acted out. Scrooge, a wealthy, but bitter and lonely old man, is taken by the "Spirit of Christmas past" to look at himself as a young man. The Spirit "*softens him up*" by showing him how, as a young man, he was loved - first by his sister and then by a beautiful young woman, who became his fiancée. Scrooge, however, became hooked on money and on the power and security he thought it would give him and the time came, when his fiancée asked him to choose between her and his love of money - and he chose money. In that sad scene, Scrooge watches, as his fiancée gives back her engagement ring to the younger Scrooge and sadly walks away. The older Scrooge calls out to his younger self, "*You fool! Go after her; don't let her go!*" But, the now wiser Scrooge has no power to change the past and has to watch, with tears in his eyes and anguish in his heart, as his younger, foolish self lets her walk away.

Despite great moral parables, such as this, we still see the tragedy of Scrooge acted out all around us - and often in us - in small things as well as great. We find, within ourselves, visions and hopes of a better world - and then we falter, as we begin to reason that it would be better to establish ourselves first - professionally, socially, financially - before we embark on our dream. Only to find, if we ever get that far, that when we are ready to reach out our hand, there is no one there to take it.

One of the difficulties in living our lives is that we can mistake "*reason*" for "*wisdom*". "*Reason*" is logic; it deals with the head, not with the heart. It can calculate the price of things, but not their value. "*Wisdom*", on the other hand, deals with what the Bible calls "*the heart*"; it roots reason in an appreciation of the goodness of the world and so knows how to judge "*value*". It is of this wisdom that Pascal spoke of when he said, "*The heart has reasons that reason does not know*". It was an area of living into which the rationality of the younger Scrooge could not enter, for he had not yet learnt to appreciate that he was loved.

But are we doomed, like Scrooge, to gain wisdom only in hindsight, when the damage is done and cannot be repaired? This, however, is a wrong question - as I heard a friend of mine say recently, "*You don't drive a car with your eyes fixed on the rear mirror*" - no purpose is served by merely dwelling on the past. The wise person looks first not to the past, but to the future and asks, "*How can I make the most of the opportunity before me?*" Then, in deciding in which direction to take, he looks in his rear mirror - looks at the past and, like Scrooge, learns from it.

However, we need to recognise that there are two movements going on in Scrooge's story - and, more importantly, in the story of our own lives. Scrooge's actions are not, by themselves, enough to change him. He needs first to be "*softened*" by the Spirit and so enabled to change. We have a dual nature - the outer and the inner - and Christianity is radically dualistic. It is not enough to confess my sins for them to be forgiven, that confession has to be the fruit of a "*softening*" or "*moulding*" by the Spirit, for it to be effective. The priest offers absolution, a re-admittance to the community, which I have injured by my actions - but only God can forgive, can heal and make new damaged hearts and relationships. And the opposite of this is also true - the Spirit may have touched my heart so that I can learn from my past mistakes, but I have to put that somehow into action for it to become real. I have a dual nature, I cannot live without the power of God, but I also cannot live without my cooperation in the movement of God. This is Covenant.

In the Passion according to St John, which is read on Good Friday, it says:

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They will look on the one whom they have pierced

This is a quote from the prophet Zechariah, the full passage is:

“But over the House of David and the citizens of Jerusalem I will pour out a spirit of kindness and prayer. They will look on the one whom they have pierced; they will mourn for him as for an only son, and weep for him as people weep for a first-born child”. ZECH 12:10

It takes courage to look on the face of the one we have injured, but we do it not to bewail the past, but to learn for the future. The future is a gift of newness, given by God at Easter – but that newness can only come by recognising Good Friday.

Diary

I enjoyed my visit to England – the daffodils and crocuses were out and very beautiful – I also enjoyed the cool weather, but strangely found the heat in some of the houses very difficult to take. However, it was too short and I was not able to visit many friends, who invited me. On top of this, I picked up a very bad cold on the Ryanair flight from Ireland, where I had gone to visit one of my nephew’s and his family, and that put me in bed for a couple of days.

On my return, I found that many of the promises, given me by the contractor renovating my house, had not been fulfilled. Some weeks are still needed for it to be finished – and I sit fuming, dreaming of firing him – but I also realise that should I do so, it will take even longer to finish! Then a few days ago, I went to the house and found only two young guys there – the others, they told me, had gone off to Java for a week’s holiday. As they say in Malaysia, “Apa boleh buat?” What to do?

I ordered a bed, many months ago, thinking I would soon have a house to put it in and recently I had to have it delivered, because the shop needed the space. It is a large bed, because I am a large man, but when it got to the house, I found it would not go through the bedroom door. The contractor said to me that I should send it back and get a smaller one – but instead I told him to break down the wall and get it in. Which, to my surprise, he did very quickly – and repaired the wall!

Finally, we have had some great news about the three youngest of the Bali Nine in prison here in Bali – Matthew, Tan and Si. Their death sentences have been commuted to life imprisonment. All three are between 21 and 24 and have been in prison for over three years now. There is now a chance that they will be able to serve their sentences in Australia. Please keep up your prayers for the three others still on death row.

A very Happy Easter to you all,

God bless

Terry