

Intro

You will all probably know the famous tale of 'A Christmas Carol' (Scrooge) as written by Charles Dickens. I was watching the Disney version of Scrooge just recently and I felt God prompt me to think of the similarities between Scrooge and the Christmas Message of Jesus. So here we are, a short session on this basis, hopefully in time for you to use in the festive season!! If not, use it in the New Year.

Movie Clip

From the Muppets Christmas Carol (the one with Michael Caine playing Scrooge) - choose any clip from these great little reproduction of the story. A great bit is right at the end of the movie when Scrooge goes round handing out presents to the muppets! Surreal but true.

Muppet Christmas Carol – It Feels Like Christmas –
<https://youtu.be/WIRpGj7LWS4> (link accessed April 2019)

The Man of Scrooge

Let's take a look at the person of Scrooge. In the story he is demonised as being a 'baddy' but is this really true? If we look around us and even into a mirror, what do we see? The Bible tells us in Romans 3:23 that:

'..all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..' We also learn from Romans 5:12, 'Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned..'

We also find from Galatians, a fairly accurate description of the human condition - and the world around us today..

Galatians 5:19-21 - The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

So perhaps the description of Scrooge is a little more close for comfort than we'd like to consider. We live in a world where materialism, perhaps more than anything, is defined as being success. Where many people spend without thinking of others. Where selfishness has replaced selflessness. Yet in the middle of this we see constant rays of salt and light, God's grace flavouring, re-flavouring the world through the lives of 'ordinary' yet through Christ 'extraordinary' Christians.

The World Around Scrooge

We see a world that is a parody of society and yet a powerful reflection of it. In the world of Scrooge there was great poverty (the very reason Charles Dickens wrote the stories he did) and great wealth. There were the haves and have-nots. We see a world reflected in the words of Jesus in Matthew 26.10-12:

Aware of this, Jesus said to them, "Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. **The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me.** When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial.

In the spiritual realm we are only too aware of the haves and have nots. Yet we must make sure that we don't become like the Pharisees. We must engage with both the poor and the rich, with those who have and with those who don't. We see Jesus talking and walking with the poor, with the middle classes, the fishermen, the prostitute, the family of Lazarus, the rich young ruler. We must also make sure that all young people are welcomed through God's love in us so they are not excluded.. Ephesians 2.11-13:

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men) remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

Scrooge the Man

Over the course of A Christmas Carol we learn more about the old misery that Scrooge has become. We see into his past and discover how he has become who he has become. We find a life of love broken, of loneliness and pain. We see a life that has made lots of money but a man with little happiness and few friends.

Let's look see at Luke 12.13-21:

Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."

Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'

“Then he said, ‘This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.’” ’

“But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’

“This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.”

Notice that Jesus doesn't simply say that riches are a bad thing - it is the storing up selfishly of riches, yet being miserly towards God spiritually and financially. I know some Christians who are well off, God has enabled this to happen. But they are not people who store up riches needlessly, but people who use their riches to help and serve others. We should all do the same, no matter what our 'riches' are or are not. We likely all struggle with materialism (the idea that getting more of the latest and best stuff makes us happy). But God's system and priorities are very different.

We need to check ourselves, our spending and habits. Are we serving God or self / materialism. Let's run the race for God and pursue his riches, ways, his kingdom, his name and his glory. God looks at the heart, he doesn't judge 'success' bvy how much we have. In fact, it is of little importance ultimately as we don't take anything with us when we die - it is our spiritual bling that is far more important! We learn that we must depend on God - we may make many plans, but it's God's plans that we need to follow.

In our contemporary world, do we find riches bringing happiness or selfishness? Usually it is selfishness. So riches do not bring contentment or true life. No, there is more to life. We know from John 14.6 that Jesus is 'the way the truth and the life.' So if we're intent on living life to the fullest, then we need to look at the life of Jesus.

Jesus came to earth as a man, leaving the comforts of heaven. Jesus talked and he walked the earth with a radical message about the Kingdom of God. He said in Luke 9:25, **'What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?'** Pointing to the fact that we can have everything and yet be nothing. Matthew 16:26 gives us another version of the same words, **'What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?'** Can we see a clearer picture of the life of Scrooge and of so many people around us today?

Let's look at some of what Jesus said, taken from Mark 8:34-36:

Then Jesus called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and

follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?

From this we learn that the key to saving and living the best possible life is to lose it in following Jesus. He doesn't necessarily mean we will die, but it is in the giving away of our whole lives to Jesus that we find true life. The more we give of ourselves to Jesus, the more he will use us and we will live life to the fullest. The less of us we give across to Jesus, the less we live life to the fullest.

The Three Ghosts

In the course of the evening, Scrooge receives 3 visits from 3 ghosts. The Ghost of Christmas Past, the Ghost of Christmas Present and the Ghost of what is yet to be.. (future). Aside from dubious comparisons with the Trinity (!) we have a whole bunch of points we can bring out from these ghosts. OK, set aside your problems with whether ghosts exist or not too!

1. Before we were saved..

..and had our lives transformed by Jesus, we were wondering around in the dark, oblivious to the realities we now see as Christians, followers of Jesus. The Bible makes this plain in several places including:

Ephesians 5:8, 'For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light.'

Colossians 1:13, 'For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves..'

1 Peter 2:9, 'But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.'

In the same way, we find that Scrooge hasn't really considered his life before the first Ghost appears in his room at night. We find that as the Ghosts visit him and confront him with a few harsh realities, Scrooge begins to consider himself more closely.

2. Ghost of Christmas Past

This is an uncomfortable experience for Scrooge. he is forced to re-live and confront his past life. During this he sees how he missed opportunities and messed up. He sees how he lost his potential beautiful wife, friends and family. He is forced to concede that he went wrong.

In Peter's famous sermon in Acts 2 we learn the following in verses 37-39:

Now when they (the people) heard this (Peter's sermon), they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call."

In 1 John 1.8-10 we learn the following:

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.

In Acts 22 we read Paul's confession of how he once persecuted God's people but changed his life around. In the same way, Scrooge is beginning to be confronted with his need to change.

3. Ghost of Christmas Present

In this, Scrooge begins to learn about what people really think of him. Imagine you were at your own funeral. What would you want people to say about you?

Movie clip of Blackadder 3

Episode is called Duel and Duality –

<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x5t001h> (link checked April 2019, please note that this isn't likely to be a legal version, just included for information).

In this, Prince George has been shot. He begins to make a dramatic speech of how he hopes he leaves behind a great legacy and that he hopes people loved him. Blackadder advises him this might be a bit optimistic. When Prince George asks what his epitaph should be, Blackadder replies, 'that you were a bit of a thicky..'

Not exactly a great epitaph (words people say about you when you've died). But Scrooge is confronted with these kinds of things. What kind of life are we living? Are we really impacting people? I don't think I do enough, I really don't. I struggle where I am in what I do but the other day a young person said to me, 'If you weren't here, I wouldn't have all the opportunities I do have..' and more stuff I won't go on about. Point is that on earth, we are called to make a difference, and The Bible brings heat to bear on this:

Galatians 6:10, 'Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.'

Ephesians 5:16, '..making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.'

We hear an amazing thing said about Job by God in Job 1.8,

' GOD said to Satan, "Have you noticed my friend Job? There's no one quite like him--honest and true to his word, totally devoted to God and hating evil." '

In Job 42.8, after all Job's trials we find that God said, **'My friend Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer. He will ask me not to treat you as you deserve for talking nonsense about me, and for not being honest with me, as he has.'** (The Message)

What a statement about a life from the Lord God himself! If you or I had God say that about us it'd be awesome!

4. Ghost of the future yet to come

This is where it gets really scary for Scrooge, it's the reality of the future - his future and the future of those around him - that really brings him to his knees..

What is our future? As Christians we have hope. The hope of salvation. Salvation means that we can be saved through accepting Jesus in our lives. Saved from what? Good question and something boffin theologians like to waste endless hours discussing. I'll answer it fairly simply - to be saved from God's anger, judgment and from hell. Is hell eternal hell? Yes, I believe it is. Those who claim hell is merely permanent destruction obviously don't read their Bibles...

In Mark 9:43-48, Jesus tells people to cut off their hand rather than sin and to 'go to hell, where the fire never goes out.' There is no question in the mind of Jesus that hell is a real place.

In Matthew 25:46 Jesus says, "And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." The Greek word for 'eternal' is the same. Since we know that Christians keeping the faith will have everlasting life (John 10:28), those who don't believe will have everlasting punishment.

In Revelation 20:15, John says that anyone whose name is not in the 'book of life' is "thrown into the lake of fire".

Luke 16.23-25 we hear the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Though the rich man was loaded and blinging in life, he found himself in hell, whereas the poor man (Lazarus) ended up in heaven. Most Bible scholars take this as a literal story, there is no suggestion from Jesus that this is a parable..

In hell, where the rich man was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.' "But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.'

Furthermore, we should live in fear of the Lord. This is no human fear (like fearing death). This is an awe, a reverence, a desire to live holy Godly lives. The purpose of our lives is to be made holy. In Hebrews 12, we learn about the Lord disciplining the ones he loves. In verse 14, the Scripture continues saying,

'Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.'

Repentance

In the end, Scrooge is brought to a place that is uncannily (spookily) similar to the word repentance. Let's read some of the original text..

"Spirit!" he cried, tight clutching at its robe, "hear me! I am not the man I was. I will not be the man I must have been but for this intercourse. Why show me this, if I am past all hope?"

For the first time the hand appeared to shake.

"Good Spirit," he pursued, as down upon the ground he fell before it: "Your nature intercedes for me, and pities me. Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life!"

The kind hand trembled.

"I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach. Oh, tell me I may sponge away the writing on this stone!"

In his agony, he caught the spectral hand. It sought to free itself, but he was strong in his entreaty, and detained it. The Spirit, stronger yet, repulsed him.

Holding up his hands in a last prayer to have his fate reversed, he saw an alteration in the Phantom's hood and dress. It shrunk, collapsed, and dwindled down into a bedpost.

We know from the Word of God that one of the conditions of entering into the Kingdom of God is repentance (turning away from the wrong things we do - the Bible calls it 'sin'). It is essential. As we read above about the people's response to Peter's sermon in Acts 2:

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

The result of repentance, confession of Christ as Lord as Saviour (lord, totally in charge of) your life - brings a real change in people (let's not talk about being filled with the Holy Spirit for now)! We pass from the old life into the new life - it's what people called 'being born again.' We are re-born, this time into the family of Jesus.

Hebrews 2:11- 'Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers.'

But there is more..

Transformation

Again, let's look at the original text of A Christmas Carol to see what happened next to Scrooge..

Yes! and the bedpost was his own. The bed was his own, the room was his own. Best and happiest of all, the time before him was his own, to make amends in!

"I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future!" Scrooge repeated, as he scrambled out of bed. "The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. Oh Jacob Marley! Heaven, and the Christmas Time be praised for this! I say it on my knees, old Jacob; on my knees!"

He was so fluttered and so glowing with his good intentions, that his broken voice would scarcely answer to his call. He had been sobbing violently in his conflict with the Spirit, and his face was wet with tears.

"They are not torn down," cried Scrooge, folding one of his bed-curtains in his arms, "they are not torn down, rings and all. They are here: I am here: the shadows of the things that would have been, may be dispelled. They will be. I know they will!"

His hands were busy with his garments all this time: turning them inside out, putting them on upside down, tearing them, mislaying them, making them parties to every kind of extravagance.

"I don't know what to do!" cried Scrooge, laughing and crying in the same breath; and making a perfect fool of himself with his stockings. "I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel, I am as merry as a school-boy. I am as giddy as a drunken man. A merry Christmas to every-body! A happy New Year to all the world! Hallo here! Whoop! Hallo!"

And so it goes on (click here for more via gutenberg.org, link checked April 2019) until we read:

Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all, and infinitely more..

We know that Christ brings massive transformation. We can see this very clearly in the life of Saul who became Paul. In Acts 22 we hear his testimony to the people in Israel. Here is some of what Paul said..

I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison.. About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, 'Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?' 'Who are you, Lord?' I asked. " 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me.

A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. He stood beside me and said, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very moment I was able to see him. "Then he said: 'The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.'

Quite a dramatic change from Christian killer to half of the Bible writer!

You see, having Christ in your life brings you access to great power, the power of God within you. It brings a new way, a love that can only come from Christ. It turns heads, winds people up, blesses people, sees others change, helps disciple and love others, it brings the Gospel to new tribes, it brings new ways of spreading the Gospel, it brings a passion for Christ. Well, that's what it should bring.

You see, the change in Scrooge was evidenced by works - Scrooge was better than his word. he did everything he said he would and infinitely more. What a testimony! What a witness! How can the life of a follower of Christ be anything but this.

Check yourself this day and every day. Discipleship is for lifetime. Jesus is Lord.