

Message for December 6, 2020

The Second Sunday in Advent

Mark 1:1-8

“The Man Who Invented Christmas” is the title of a movie that was released three years ago. For those of you who are not familiar with it, this fictional movie tells the story of how Charles Dickens was inspired to write his classic novel, “A Christmas Carol”. I thoroughly enjoyed the movie though I have to question its title; Charles Dickens most certainly did not ‘invent’ Christmas. Nevertheless his book has had a tremendous impact on how we celebrate Christmas. Indeed all we have to do is think of all the movies and shows that it has inspired including such as the classic movie which starred Alastair Sim, Mickey Mouse’s Christmas Carol and the latest incarnation of the tale, “A Nashville Christmas Carol”. These are all different takes on Dickens’ story but they all follow the basic storyline.

It was Christmas Eve and Ebenezer Scrooge, who was a miser and a thoroughly unpleasant man, was visited by three spirits; the ghosts of Christmas past, Christmas present and Christmas yet-to-come. After these encounters Scrooge realized how he had misspent the years gone by, was still messing up, and what would happen if he did not mend his ways. In response he repented and changed his ways altogether. He sent the largest turkey that money could buy to his long-suffering employee, Bob Cratchit, and then made him a partner in his accounting firm. Scrooge also donated a large sum of money to a charity dedicated to helping the poor, something that he had always refused to do before. Last but not least, Scrooge also went to spend Christmas with his only living relative, a nephew from whom he had been estranged for years because he disapproved of his choice of wife. Scrooge in fact went from one extreme to another; he went from being a very miserable and unhappy person to being a very contented man and a pleasure to be with. In short he repented and because he did, he was set free to enjoy Christmas and be the man that he was always meant to be. Scrooge was set free to be at peace with both his self and with others. This in fact, being set free and

being at peace with both oneself and with others explains the story's enduring popularity down through the years. Indeed, being at peace with both ourselves and with others is one of the things that is supposed to characterize this special time of year. After all we are celebrating the birth of the Prince of Peace! Sadly though, such isn't always the case.

I have never forgotten a conversation that I had with a police officer years ago. He spoke about how much he hated working on Christmas Day and I naturally assumed that he didn't like working that day because he preferred to be at home with his family. Well yes, he said, he'd much rather be at home than working but that wasn't the main reason why he disliked it so much. It is the domestic calls he said. Family members don't always get along and so they do their best to avoid each other all year long. But then, just because it is Christmas, they feel that they have to get together. And they think that just because it is Christmas they will get along too. Well he said, they don't always get along and it is us poor cops who have to deal with it.

The truth is that we cannot truly celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace if there isn't any peace within us or between us. Certainly John the Baptist knew this.

John the Baptist was the last and greatest prophet of them all and he was the one whose ministry proclaimed the imminent revealing of the Messiah. But how did John tell the people to prepare for the coming of the Christ? Not by throwing a party or by feasting and eating too much. Nor did he tell the people to prepare by giving presents either. Instead he told them that they were to prepare for the Prince of Peace by being at peace with themselves, with one another, and with God himself. And John insisted too that the only way that this could happen was by confessing and repenting; by letting go of the painful past, saying 'I'm sorry' when warranted and by trying to make things right.

Now what went for those people so long ago as they awaited the revealing of the Messiah still goes for us today as we prepare to celebrate his birth. Repentance however is far easier said than done. It is hard on

the ego to admit that we were wrong. It can be embarrassing and perhaps even humiliating for us to try and make things right; in fact it is oftentimes easier just to leave things the way they are. To return to “A Christmas Carol”, how easy was it for Scrooge to accept his nephew’s long-standing invitation to go to his house for Christmas dinner, knock on the front door, go in and then apologize to his nephew’s wife; “Can you forgive a stubborn old fool?” Repentance wouldn’t have been easy for Scrooge and it isn’t always easy for us either. Nevertheless we cannot truly celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace unless we are at peace with ourselves, others and God as well. The well-known Christian author, Rick Warren makes this point in one of his many books.

In his book, “The Purpose of Christmas”, Warren claims that far too many of us really don’t enjoy Christmas simply because we have lost sight of what it is truly all about or, as he says, its purpose. The purpose of Christmas however is really quite simple. Christ was born to be our saviour; to die for our sins and so bring about peace and reconciliation between us and God. If the life, death and resurrection of Christ have any real meaning for us, then we must seek peace and reconciliation with one another. As I have already noted though, this is far easier said than done. Warren however quite rightly points out that all too often we lose sight of what forgiveness really means. To quote Warren himself:

“Many people are reluctant to reconcile strained relationships because they don’t understand the difference between forgiveness and trust or the difference between reconciliation and resolution.

First of all, reconciliation is not the same as resolution. Reconciliation ends hostility. It doesn’t mean you’ve resolved all the problems in the relationship. You continue to talk about the issues and work on them, but now you do it with respect and love instead of sarcasm and anger. You can disagree agreeably.

Second, there is a big difference between forgiveness and trust. We forgive so we can get on with our lives instead of getting stuck in the past

due to resentment and bitterness. Forgiveness takes care of the past. Trust is all about the future, and it must be earned over time. Trust can be lost in a second, but it takes a long time to rebuild it.

Christmas, the season of 'peace on earth, good will toward men', is the perfect time to offer the gift of grace to others, while celebrating the grace God has shown you."

As God has forgiven us so too we must seek to forgive others. Indeed this is what we even ask God to do every time we say the Lord's Prayer, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" or, to put it more simply, forgive us our sins to the degree or extent that we have forgiven those who have sinned against us. If we take forgiveness seriously, then we will realize that it can be very hard to do and perhaps even seemingly impossible. What we must remember though is that there is a very real difference between reconciliation and resolution, forgiveness and trust. As distasteful and as challenging as it may sometimes be, we as the disciples of Jesus are called to be a reconciling and forgiving people and not just at Christmas either. Indeed only if we are prepared to at least try and do this, and I mean really try, can we experience the peace and goodwill of the Christmas season or, as some people call it, the Christmas Spirit.