

“I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come round....as a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time: the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and 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.” Do you recognize those words from Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*? They are spoken by Scrooge’s nephew Fred. Several versions of this beloved classic appear on television every Christmas season. The Guthrie Theater has been performing it every year since its opening in the 60's to packed audiences.

A Christmas Carol, on the surface, is delightful, family-friendly, holiday entertainment. But just below the surface of this simple conversion story is Charles Dickens’ scathing commentary on the treatment of the poor in Victorian England in the middle of the 1800's. Dickens places on the lips of Scrooge the thinking of many of the day, especially the rich and powerful. The poor are poor because they made themselves so. Charity is simply the means to make “idle people merry.” Prisons and workhouses are sufficient refuges for the poor and the hungry, and they provided by involuntary taxation. There is no need for charity at Christmas or any other day of the year. If the conditions in these places were dreadful, oppressive, cruel, and people died there or elsewhere because of starvation, it would, in Scrooge’s opinion, take care of the surplus population.

Scrooge is forced by a series of apparitions to see and deal with the surplus population, with the demons of ignorance and want, and with his own mortality. He comes to see the global interconnections that bind humanity. He is jolted out of his own isolation and welcomed back into that society from which he had excluded himself. What Dickens offered to the society of his day was the possibility of a change of heart, a belief that we

can change—if not our fundamental character, then at least our behavior and our attitudes. These changes in turn can have an enormous impact on the world in which we live.

"IN THE FIFTEENTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF TIBERIAS CAESAR....THE WORD OF GOD CAME TO JOHN THE SON OF ZECHARIAH IN THE DESERT." Who? Johanan ben Zechariah, the Dipper. Who? a nobody, really. The word of God came not to the mighty Caesar, who thought himself divine. Not to the priests in holy Jerusalem. Not to the local rulers, client kings of Rome. The word of God didn't come to wealthy or the powerful, to none of those, but to this strange, enigmatic, marginal character, living in the desert of Judea. This is the one God has commissioned to communicate a new message to the people. The words of an ancient prophet are used by all the Gospel writers to describe his special mission: "A HERALD'S VOICE IN THE DESERT, CRYING OUT: MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, CLEAR HIM A STRAIGHT PATH!" This newest prophet announces that God now is acting once more, as he did of old, to deliver once again the people from the land of slavery. Once again God will lead them through the desert home to the land of promise. Wow! What a message! Now what?

"JOHN WENT THROUGH THE WHOLE REGION OF THE JORDAN, PROCLAIMING A BAPTISM OF REPENTANCE FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS." That's it? That's all? A ritual washing in the Jordan? Surely, there must be more to it than that. The people respond to the ministry of the Baptist, to his preaching. They do undergo John's baptism. But then the multitudes want to know what practical effect that baptism is to have in the way they live. They ask simply: "What are we to do?" They want to know how they must now live that they have heard the word of God spoken by John. "How are we to act," they ask. They find out in the continuation of the Gospel we just heard next week.

John answers each class of people in stunningly simple terms? Care for the poor and disadvantaged through individual sharing; proper collection

of taxes; no extortion from a position of power and privilege; contentment with wages. We might have expected a more fundamental, more difficult, more demanding code of moral behavior in the light of the stupendous announcement that God's Kingdom was at hand. But there really was no change: what God expected of people then in the way they lived is no different from what God expected in the past: conversion of heart, return to the covenant, obedience to the requirements of that covenant, especially in the way they took care of the orphan and the widow. That's the OT way of speaking of the poor, hungry, powerless, homeless, those at the edges of society, at the margins of church and of state. What the prophets wanted, what John preached, what Jesus called for, what the church has announced since is the very same thing.

What John the baptizer offered was the possibility of a change of heart, the hope that we can change—if not our fundamental character, then at least our behavior and our attitudes. This change in turn can have an enormous impact on the world in which we live, and incidently on our eternal destiny.

I've gotten several e-mails already urging me to greet people with "Merry Christmas!" not just "Seasons greetings" or "Happy holidays!" Fair enough. But if Christmas isn't the occasion for the word of God to become incarnate again in our lives, in our behavior, in the way we treat our fellow travelers on the road, especially the poor, what does it matter what we say? And if we really did these things, would people really have any objection to "Merry Christmas"?

These are the words of a third century theologian, words I like to repeat at least once every Advent: **"My brothers and sisters, what does it avail you that Christ once took flesh, if he does not come into your soul also? Let us pray that that coming, which was once the taking on of flesh, may be daily repeated in our lives, so that we too can say, 'I live not now I, but Christ lives in me.'"** That's what Christmas really is.