

Generosity as a Way of Life

One of my favorite Christmas stories is Charles Dickens' classic "A Christmas Carol." Over the years I've seen many versions of it, my favorite being the 1951 version with Alastair Sim.

Most all of us know the story; Ebenezer Scrooge is a miserly old man who lives alone, focused only on his money and making more of it. He has no friends, and his only employee lives in the poor part of the city with his family barely having enough to eat. As he is visited on Christmas Eve by the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future, his eyes are opened to the mistakes he made in the past; to how his decisions are impacting people in the present; and what the future will hold for him if he does not change his ways. He awakens Christmas morning a changed man, full of joy because of the connections he has made to family. He shares his wealth with the needy, becomes a second father to Bob Cratchit's son Tiny Tim, and we are told lives the rest of his days in great joy.

However, notice what Scrooge does not become at the end of the story? Poor. He continues to live well, continues to have his business, and presumably continues to have a comfortable life.

Though a fictional story, it's important to note that in real life, we have many saints in our Church who were wealthy individuals too, from kings and queens to people who were well off in life. Simply being poor is not virtuous; nor is being rich a cause for scandal. Rather, the question is what does one do with what they are given? The question applies both to our tangible and intangible resources.

With respect to our possessions, sometimes they can be a bit consuming. In our second reading this week, Saint James says to some of the wealthy that "come now, you rich, weep and wail over your impending miseries. Your wealth has rotted away...your gold and silver corroded." He is critical of those who withheld wages from the workers, and misused the wealth they were given. It's certainly something we hear from our Lord too in the Gospels. However, we also meet in the Gospels people who are wealthy and generous. For instance, a couple of weeks ago on Friday in the 24th week of Ordinary Time (September 17), our Gospel spoke of Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna and "many others" who "provided for them out of their resources." These were holy women who were women of means who helped fund the ministry of Jesus. There was also Saint Paul's first convert, Saint Lyida. She made purple dye, and it was literally worth more than it's weight in gold. However, what all of these people and so many others have had in common was their possessions were not their reason for living.

Sometimes greed can consume us; we can want more and more things, and forget the blessings we have. With respect to greed or wealth, it's just good to take an honest look of what we have and how we use our resources. Again, we can have and enjoy possessions. But do we spend too much on them? Are we honest on our taxes? Do we steal from our workplace? We also do not have to give to everyone who asks for

money, (and need to be on guard frankly against those who prey on generosity, sometimes institutions or a friend or family member), but want to look at how we give to charity and those in need. Sometimes we can give more, other times we can't give as much due to having to pay the bills and other costs we have, but there are many ways we can give and be generous.

Note that giving includes more than money. Our Lord speaks to John in the Gospel this week and tells him not to worry about someone driving out demons in Jesus' name, saying this is a good thing. The individual is using what God has given him for the glory of God. So how do we use what God gave us? Scrooge was an adept businessman, but he used his talents for himself until his eyes were opened. He then was able to find that he could use his talents for the good of others. It's important for us to remember that we can do so much, but we want to do it for the right reasons. We need to be honest with ourselves if we are overly competitive, or doing something to serve our ego or expecting something in return rather than doing it freely to serve God and others, remembering that God sees our actions even if others don't always give us the recognition we deserve, and also remembering we are each given different gifts. It's important to rejoice in that, rather than compare ourselves to others.

The narrator closes "A Christmas Carol" with: "He had no further intercourse with Spirits, but lived upon the Total Abstinence Principle, ever afterwards; and 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! And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God Bless Us, Every One!" Admittedly I had to look up "Total Abstinence Principial," and it's a play on words. It's not referring to alcohol, but it refers to abstinence from being bitter, mean-spirited, angry, dour, greedy and unforgiving. Good advice indeed, because it's so easy to serve ourselves and in the process become rich in some things but poor in what matters most. Let us strive to work together for God's glory, remembering that each one of us can do so much to make a difference in this world when we use the resources we are blessed with.

God bless,

Fr. Paul