

A Christmas Story

For years now, every July 25, KSSK radio plays Christmas carols all morning long.

They do that to remind folks how many people die in accidents during the months before Christmas -- and to remind all of us to slow down and improve our chances of being around for Christmas this year.

Today's readings are something like KSSK's "Christmas in July" because the readings have an awful lot to say about life, and death, and in a roundabout way, Christmas too.

First the Christmas part!

Doesn't this parable about the rich man and Lazarus remind you of a Christmas story?

Doesn't it remind you of that very famous one: the one entitled "A Christmas Carol" -- the story of Ebenezer Scrooge?

He's the miserable tightwad rich man who is visited by three ghosts, the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future.

He becomes the rich man who repents, as in "enters into the larger mind" and therefore "changes his mind" about everything he thought he knew.

"A Christmas Carol," by Charles Dickens, is a tale told every year at Christmastime and it's a tale about choices, and consequences, and money, and what we mean to one another.

The parable Jesus tells us today is very much like the Scrooge story; and, the parable, like Scrooge's story, has its roots in a folktale.

And because Jesus takes up and embellishes what is a common folk tale from his day, let's NOT join our fundamentalist friends who love to say:

"Here we have a birds eye view of the afterlife!"

"The good go to heaven and have front row seats – watching the bad burn to a crisp for all eternity!"

You don't need to spend much time thinking about that scenario to understand how crazy, not to mention, how completely anti-Christian, such an afterlife would be!

We know that in Jesus, eventually, all will indeed be saved.

For how else are we to understand our Lord's promise that "when I am lifted up I will drag all things to me?" John 12:32.

Or Paul's repeated insights that just as all of humanity fell in Adam, all of humanity shall be brought home in Christ. 1 Cor. 15:22.

And so it seems likely that Jesus isn't talking about what the after-life is like, any more than Charles Dickens is talking about the actual existence of ghosts.

These stories, both for Jesus and Dickens, are intended to shed light on how we live, not about what happens after we die.

The difference between Scrooge and the rich man in the parable is that Scrooge, at long last, gets the message, and changes -- while the rich fella in our story today keeps missing every chance to turn around.

Man, is he stuck!

And his stuck-ness is a testament to the power of money and social position.

It's a testament to the power of the sense of entitlement that those who have -- deserve what they have.

It is a testament to how power and position and money can blind us to who we really are; and to who we are meant to become; blinding us to the truth of who we belong to.

Just think of Jeffery Epstein, whose life of opulence and power over others ended at the end of a handmade noose, in a prison cell.

And then there's the head of Home Depot, who recently complained in the Wall Street Journal that,

"these days getting rich off a profitable business is regarded as almost sinister.

But we have nothing to apologize for and we don't think the government should have more of our profits."

And wouldn't you know, the owner of Home Depot is a prominent member of the Greek Orthodox Church, and a lavish giver to the Roman Catholic Archdiocese in New York. See, *Commonweal*, 9/11/19.

And Jesus scratches his head and asks: "why give the money if you keep missing the message?"

At any rate, Scrooge eventually comes around and happily opens his heart and his wallet (in THAT order!) to people he once despised -- people he now sees as his brothers and sisters.

The rich man in the parable, legend calls him Dives, like Jeff Epstein, like that owner of Home Depot, well, he isn't so astute.

Even though he calls Abraham "father" and sees Lazarus snuggling into Abraham's bosom, dopey Dives still doesn't make the connection that since he and Lazarus are children of the same father, they are also, and have always been, brothers.

He didn't make the connection when Lazarus starved outside his gate and he doesn't make the connection even now, in death.

Instead, he tells Abraham to turn Lazarus into a delivery boy -- "I'm thirsty!" -- because after all, Lazarus should serve this rich man -- that's the way of the world!

Our Jewish siblings believe that even sinners in hell can repent, and when they do, Abraham himself goes into hell and brings them into paradise.

But before that can happen, they need to see, they need to hear.

They need to change.

You see, the flames are not to punish, but to encourage a change of heart.

But Dives isn't there yet, and the class on change will not be cut short, even if he is dying of thirst.

Maybe with enough heat it will occur to the man that money and prestige and power really aren't God's ways; really aren't what we are created for.

And maybe, like Scrooge, he will come to see that life is intended to be lived with generosity and humor, and freedom from greed, and freeing others from need.

That the bounty of this world is the gift of God for the people of God.

But this rich man's not there yet.

Since Dives Plan A doesn't work (issuing commands), he quickly moves to Plan B: begging!

Begging on behalf of his social equals, his equally tight wadded, uptight, privileged brothers!

Abraham responds that Dives' plan to save his brothers is a non-starter.

They have the Holy Scripture, which commands and cajoles and pleads that we have mercy on the poor, that we welcome the illegal immigrant, that we care for those with little, whether or not in our eyes they are deserving.

This is the way and the wisdom of God, after all.

But Dives is still clueless, and so he insists that the wisdom of God isn't wise enough, and he doubles down, arguing that God's way of giving us his Word just won't cut it.

And Dives has the solution!

Send someone back from the dead!

In fact, since Lazarus won't be busy bringing me some water, sent HIM back to my rich, self-centered brothers: that will certainly do the trick!

And here is where the irony of Jesus' wonderful story is especially sweet.

All this time, Dives himself is dealing with two dead guys, Abraham and Lazarus, and none these dealings with the dead move him an inch from his conviction that the world runs on money, power and prestige!

If a face to face meeting with the dead can't melt Dives' heart, what chance will it have to melt his brothers' hearts?

As Jesus concludes his story today, we are left to wonder whether the rich man and his brothers, like Scrooge, will find life.

Scrooge gets the message, and opens his windows and heart and wallet to those in need.

Will Dives and his brothers do the same?

Will they allow the life that Paul writes so eloquently about, a life that remembers every day that "we brought nothing into the world, ... we can take nothing out of it" — will they let that life in?

For you see, what Paul discovers -- after his own rude awakening to the ways of God -- is that selfless giving places us squarely in the river of creation -- a creation that starts as Nothing -- only to become -- Everything.

In the act of selfless giving, we find harmony with the Mystery we call God.

We step into the flow of creation that carries us in her currents to places more magnificent than we can ever imagine.

We find the narrow door that leads to the Kingdom of God.

A kingdom that turns the world's expectations and judgments and certainties upside down.

A kingdom where everyone is welcome.

And so, I say to you what Paul says to Timothy:

"Tell those who are rich in this world's wealth to quit being so full of themselves and so obsessed with money, which is here today and gone tomorrow.

Tell them to go after God, who piles on all the riches we could ever manage -- to do good, to be rich in helping others, to be extravagantly generous.

If they do that, they'll build a treasure that will last, they'll discover the life that is ... truly life!" 1Tim 6:19, The Message TR.

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