Bishop of Chichester

Christmas Day Sermon

Christmas 2020

Like so many aspects of our life, our Christmas celebrations are largely the product of the 19th century. Charles Dickens plays a big part in this, with his darkly challenging story, *A Christmas Carol*, which artfully tells us what every family ought to expect at Christmas: time off work, good things to eat and drink, and the enjoyment of each other’s company.

Dickens has a sharp eye for detail and an ear for the sound of life in the labouring and criminal backstreets of London, and he understands that the pettiness of family life – squabbles about who gets the custard first how offence is easily taken – is nonetheless out-weighed by the ties of kindred and friendship.

At some point over the festive season I will always watch the musical *Oliver!*, Lionel Bart’s magnificent adaptation of the novel. The story explores mysterious parentage, a favourite theme of Dickens, which in itself touches on the Christmas narrative of the fatherhood of God. The musical expands this into show-case songs that powerfully convey a sentiment you could place in any Christmas carol, as Oliver sings, “Where is love? Does it fall from skies above?”, and the cockney Artful Dodger welcomes Oliver with, “Consider yourself at home: consider yourself, one of the family” and subsequently, on meeting Nancy, Oliver joins the ragamuffin chorus that affirms, “I’d do anything, yes, anything, for you”.

Of course, Dickens was not in any way writing a story, far less these songs, in order to articulate the Christian themes of the divine love, baptism into the family of the Church, and the challenging demands of following Jesus Christ. Indeed, his attitude towards the established Church and religion in general was cool and remote. But this should not be confused with a failure to understand the deeper significance of the moral nature of Christian faith and its outworking in human behaviour and relationships as a theological statement about the dignity of the human person.

This deeper significance is rarely far away from Dickens’s mind, and as a consummate performer he takes us to some shockingly dark places in order to reveal something that is good news for all people.

In *Bleak House*, Dickens leads us down city lanes into courtyards of unbelievable squalor and misery. Poverty is the bond that unites the people who live in the shadow of the privileged practitioners of the law. There we meet Jo, the crossing sweeper, a homeless boy bereft of family, hounded by police, and whose only friend is a man fallen on hard times and into a destructive drug habit. At the inquest into his death, Jo states simply, “He was wery good to me, he wos!”.

At the end of this chapter, entitled “Our dear brother”, Dickens the narrator speaks directly to Jo, a character he has conjured up before us, assuring Jo that he is not quite in outer darkness. A ray of light shines out from Jo in his public recognition of kindness from one who was as poor as he was. And Dickens lets us eavesdrop on the question that recognition and repayment of kindness poses: “Who can say what will be done to Jo in greater hands than men’s?”.

In the early 1850s this was a pressing question, emerging from the popular novelist at the same time as a contemporary artist, G F Watts was shaping public opinion by a new turn in his work. His more than life-size painting of the Good Samaritan placed the demands of kindness at the centre of intellectual life in Britain, and it was accompanied by a series of other paintings that reinforced the moral question about kindness and its absence in the society of that time. So *Found Drowned*,his painting of a young woman, lying cruciform on the river bank, addressed the issue of suicide; *The Irish Famine* depicted a young Irish family, refugees from Ireland, and modelled on classic depictions of Mary and Joseph with the Christ child fleeing from Bethlehem, while *The Seamstress* is a meditation on sweatshop labour – a topic that still surfaces in Britain today.

Like G F Watts, Charles Dickens, was skilfully in using the media of his day to present the issues of poverty, disease, exploitation and despair. The circulation of his published work brought these issues into the orbit of the new class of industrialist and wealthy readership. But his storylines also built a bridge between the grinding misery of poverty and the benefits of education, wealth and enduring relationships of family and friends. Just as Oliver Twist takes into a new future the experience of life in the workhouse, so respectable society is asked to believe that the people who exist precariously on the streets and in substandard accommodation and work are people like us, from families like ours, often lost to us, but with needs like ours.

The man who befriended Jo went by the name of *Nemo*, the Latin word for Nobody. When he says to Jo, “I am as poor as you today” and was “wery good” to Jo, Dickens is taking us directly to the mystery of Christmas that we are celebrating.

As St Paul describes it, Jesus being rich becomes “as poor as we are today” in order that we might share his riches – life in all its abundant glory, in heaven. This is kindness; it is built upon the conviction that we are kith and kin – we are human-kind, and out of compassion for us who live in the shadow of death, the Son of God has become as poor as we are, one of our kind, in order to comprehend the evil of death and to overpower it by love.

Dickens is not sentimental about this, in spite of what we have done to jazz up A Christmas Carol, or Oliver Twist. He is a stern realist who shows us ourselves, and skilfully invites us to accept that for the gift of life that has been given to us, we shall be accountable to the giver, God himself. Against the harsh reality of poverty and disease, kindness is not a mood or a feeling of mild concern; it is the moral foundation of society and the theological foundation of our belief about the human person made by God and redeemed by God in our humanity.

This Christmas, like no other that most of us have ever known, is one I hope we shall never forget. I hope it will be one in which the stark reality of the God who becomes as poor as we are today will always stand out. For we are poor, diseased, afraid and without the freedom to be with those we love.

In the gloom of this social – and global – reality, the fragility of the Christ child demands one thing of us: that we respond to his kindness by kindness to others and, in right measure, to ourselves. Kindness, whether it be hidden or heroic, is the practical definition of the shaft of light that startles shepherds, that guides Magi in search of wisdom, and that shines out from the Bethlehem stable as the Virgin Mother offers us her divine child who has taken human-kindness from her flesh and blood. And as a vaccine against the contagion of our consumerism and waste, it is also the source of hope and joy. I leave it to another English wordsmith, Robert Southwell, to describe it for us.

O dying souls, behold your living spring;

O dazzled eyes, behold your sun of grace;

Dull ears, attend what word this Word doth bring;

Up, heavy hearts, with joy your joy embrace.

From death, from dark, from deafness, from despairs,

This life, this light, this Word, this joy repairs.

May your worship here this morning, by whatever means you are present, be a source of joy of hope for a kinder future on earth and its perfection in heaven.