

*Preached by the Revd Angus Ritchie, Fellows' Chaplain, on 21 February (Lent 1) 2010, Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford.*

Many Christians use Lent as a time for devotional reading. It often falls to the clergy to offer recommendations. Today, I want to make an unusual suggestion - that *A Christmas Carol*, that great festive classic of Charles Dickens, can provide a key to the true meaning of this season of fasting and prayer.

The idea first came to me on a cold December evening, under the railway arches near Southwark Cathedral. I was watching a rather unusual staging of *A Christmas Carol*, where the audience and players walked together through the chilly vaults. Of course, we all revelled in the wonderfully misanthropic portrayal of Scrooge. But it was the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Future who really got me thinking. What struck me afresh was how little these ghosts actually *do*. They do not rebuke Scrooge for his miserliness and his cruelty; there is no recrimination or finger-wagging. Silently, simply, relentlessly, they force him to confront reality.

The Ghost of Christmas Past shows Scrooge a world of lost possibilities – taking him back to the time when his heart had not been hardened by cynicism and avarice, and showing the fateful choices which made him into such a miser; the Ghost of Christmas Present forces him to recognise the consequences of his current actions, and especially their impact on the Cratchett family. The Ghost of Christmas Future shows him where this life is leading – to an unloved, untended, lonely grave.

These ghosts cast some light on what *God's* judgment might be like – the judgment to which we open ourselves in this penitential season. For God's judgment confronts us with reality – his word pierces through our layers of self-deception, pierces through the false gods of profit, popularity and status on which we set our hearts, pierces through our shell of self-protecting cynicism. God's judgment forces us see ourselves as we really are – to see, the futility of our self-deception, the emptiness of our false gods and the destructiveness of our cynicism. And why does God force this painful truth upon us? Because he loves us. And it is only when we face the reality of our current life that we can grow into the fuller life for which he made us.

As T.S. Eliot observed, human beings cannot bear too much reality. It's hard work – and we can only face the worst of ourselves because of another reality to which Lent opens us: the reality of God's love. *We* can face the truth about ourselves, because *God*, who knows the secrets of our hearts, loves us unconditionally. In the cross of Jesus Christ, we see that God's response to our sin is not condemnation but deliverance.

The liturgies of Lent open us to God's judgment. Their words of penitence urge us to face the reality of our sins and their impact on others, just as the chastening words of the Ash Wednesday liturgy, 'Remember thou art dust, and unto dust shalt thou return' – force us to face the reality of our mortality.

Of course, for us as for Scrooge, facing our sins and facing our mortality are intimately related. We won't go on forever; the choices we make each day mean there are paths down which we have decided not to travel, possibilities we have shut down, perhaps permanently. We need to ask what kind of values we will affirm, in our deeds as well as our words. As I face my finitude, I am forced to ask: *what do I want this life to say?*

This question needs to be considered alongside an honest examination of what my life currently says. What would you say my values and priorities were if you looked, not at the beliefs I profess, but at the ways I spend my time and money, the things that preoccupy and vex me, the ways I treat the people around me?

Lent helps us to explore the gap between the answers we give to these two questions: *what does this life say* – what does it say about what I seem to value and prioritise – and *what do I want it to say?* I want to look at three things which can help us to begin to address these questions honestly – so that that our lives can be reshaped by God’s loving judgment. The first is *fasting*. Lent is given its shape by Jesus’ sojourn in the wilderness – a fast, not just from food, but from words and work. Even more than from excessive eating, noise and busy-ness are things from which our culture needs to fast. For we use them to crowd out the questions God might ask of our way of life. Sitting still and doing nothing is anything but lazy. For many of us, it can be the hardest thing to do. It is much easier to crowd out the tricky questions about our lives by plunging in to frenetic activity. Sitting still and doing nothing is very different from slumping in front of the TV or the computer screen – it means fasting from *all* the things that fill our minds, and seeing what might emerge from the silence of our hearts.

Now, sitting still, quieting our minds, opening them to what God might have to say – these are difficult things to do, and there is a wealth of advice from our forbears in the faith on how we might go about it. The western church has forgotten much of this rich heritage – which is one reason so many people turn to Buddhism for advice on how to be still and mindful. There is, in fact, a striking overlap between techniques taught by many Buddhists for meditation and the wisdom of Christian contemplatives. For, in both cases, the aim is to still the mind: to give us something to do with our active mind (saying the Jesus prayer, or focusing attention on our breathing) – not as an end in itself but as a means to slowing us down, moving beyond a state of active thought to one of receptivity.

If you are serious about exploring this in Lent, there are some short, good books on the subject. One piece of advice they all give is that one should aim to do a little regularly, rather than setting unrealistic targets. Oddly enough, most people find silent prayer easier in a group (the Catholic Chaplaincy is one place where this happens, several times a week).

The second aid is *Scripture*. Debates about the authority of the Bible are important, but they can distract us from a more personal question. How do I make time to engage with Scripture, in the expectation that the words on the page may become the vehicle for God to speak a living word to me? In every Christian tradition there are people who have ceased to let Scripture challenge and surprise them – whether by forcing it into a dogmatic system which flattens out its richness and diversity, or by treating it too lightly and dismissively. You don’t have to be a fundamentalist to engage with Scripture expectantly and attentively. Resources from all the Christian traditions can help us to do so. Sabina Alkire has already spoken about one of my favourites – the excellent ‘Pray as You Go’ website, produced by the Jesuits. It provides a ten-minute meditation on each day’s Lectionary readings, allowing them to speak to the specific situations each of us faces, and you can listen to it at your computer or download it to your iPod and literally pray as you go. Even if you don’t decide to use it regularly, it’s worth using once or twice, just to see an example of Scripture being taken seriously, as a vehicle for God’s living word, in a way that is alive to the insights of Biblical criticism and scholarship.

The final aid on our Christian journey is the wisdom of *other people*. Thankfully, God does not send us Ghosts of Past, Present and Future, to cut through our illusions and make us face reality all in one go. However, the journey towards a truthful assessment of our lives one we cannot make alone. God has not given us the gift of seeing ourselves as others see us. We need other people to tell us how we look. That's something people close to us may be good at doing – but it may also be helpful to have a more detached, experienced companion on the spiritual journey. That's one reason for the Sacrament of Confession - for that completely confidential opportunity to seek the counsel of a priest, take stock of our lives, and through his or her words of absolution, hear the truth that God forgives us. It's also why some people have a spiritual director, someone they meet a few times a year to talk through their life of prayer and discipleship – outside their immediate circle of friendship and of church life.

*What does my life say about what matters, about what is of true value? And what do I want it to say?* These questions were forced on Ebenezer Scrooge by three ghostly visitors. They are questions we can choose to engage with, or to evade. If we're serious about engaging with them, then we will need silence, Scripture, and the wisdom of other people as companions on the journey.

Today, if you're a member of the College Foundation, you will receive another gift from across the generations – a token, just worth 5, 10 or 20 pence. Claymond's Dole stands as a memorial to the friendship, the generosity and faith of three scholars. It's their lasting statement about what *they* thought mattered in life. As it is distributed among us, let us give thanks for those who have taught us something of friendship, generosity and faith – and let us ponder the statement we would have our lives make; the values and the loves to which we try and witness.