

MERCY INCARNATE: WHAT MAKES US CHRISTMAS PEOPLE?

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Are you a *Christmas person*? What does the question call to mind? Lights and tinsel? The ceremonial Christmas goose? Christmas carols? Santa in the shopping mall? (And all of it starting just after Halloween, it seems?) In this short reflection, I'd like to see if we can't take advantage of this special time in history—Christmas days away, a Jubilee Year of Mercy having just begun—to redefine the concept of *Christmas People*.

Recall Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. At its core, this is fundamentally a story of Christmas people like Fred and Fezziwig, and not-so-Christmas people, like Ebenezer Scrooge and the late Jacob Marley. Early on in the story, Scrooge is characterized by his grouchy response to all things Christmassy. A day off work, sharing gifts, the family dinner: bah humbug to all of it. "*Every fool who goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips should be boiled in his own pudding,*" he bitterly proclaims.

I think most people remember this about Scrooge—he was a grouch, with grouchy tastes about Christmassy things. Much more central in the story, I contend, is his profound selfishness. When asked to donate for their cause, Scrooge refers the poor to prisons instead, claiming that he "*can't afford to make idle people merry.*" On hearing that the brutal conditions in English workhouses cause their workers to prefer death, he actually encourages them to die and "*decrease the surplus population!*" It's clear that Scrooge has chosen his own welfare, and laid up treasure for himself only.

When Scrooge is confronted by the ghost of his old companion, Jacob Marley—the two were "kindred spirits"—Marley reveals the fundamental reason that Christmas is so contrary to the misers' liking.



“At this time of the rolling year,” he says, *“I suffer most.”* Importantly for our purposes, this is not merely a matter of taste! He laments, *“Why did I walk through crowds of fellow-beings with my eyes turned down, and never raise them to that blessed Star which led the Wise Men to a poor abode! Were there no poor homes to which its light would have conducted me! No space of regret can make amends for one life’s opportunity misused!”*

It’s clear that Marley is no “Christmas person,” but it’s not for dislike of pageantry or jolliness. Christmas reminds Marley of who he could have been, who he was *meant* to be. St. John Paul II wrote that *“Christ is the definitive incarnation of mercy.”* Christmas is the birth of God’s mercy incarnate. What does this mean? When we contemplate the birth of Jesus, mercy is its plainest significance: that we who were dead might come to life, because the gap between men and God, impassable by our powers, was closed for good when God “crossed over” and became man. Christmas is not presents, hams, and carols: Christmas is the feast of our reunion with love itself, the end of humanity’s broken heart, our salvation from death. The birth of God’s mercy incarnate.

Now, by itself, mercy might have consoled Marley! He was a sinner like all of us, and mercy is just what sinners need. But God’s grace, though freely given, is not cheap. God’s mercy calls out to us for conversion, and this was Marley’s grief. On Christmas, the perfect mercy of God became human, so that we might become *perfected in mercy*. The Incarnation is a two-way street: God’s mercy comes to us to show us to come to him by our own merciful living. Christ taught us this: Blessed are the merciful. If you have mercy on others, so the Father will have mercy on you. Whenever you show mercy to others, you show it to Me.

Having died, Marley now sees these heavenly possibilities with clarity. So when Scrooge tries to offer Marley an earthly consolation—by complimenting his business acumen—Marley’s rebuke is swift. *“Business! Mankind was my business. The common welfare*



was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were all, my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!”

The real reason, then, that Marley is no Christmas person is not his taste in holiday food, caroling, or décor. Marley (and Scrooge) are not Christmas people because *they lacked mercy*. This was a fundamental refusal of the very meaning of Christmas—the birth of mercy incarnate. Because at Christmas God gave us one, final, irrevocable, and unending work of His mercy, so likewise we are called to work out small mercies with one another. We become properly Christian when we become a *mercy people*.

That conversion is the rest of the story, of course. Scrooge learns empathy and becomes a mercy person. Dickens tells us that Scrooge became “*as good a man as the good old city knew... and it was always said of him that he knew how to keep Christmas well.*” That’s the spirit of Christmas people—not loving carols and trimming the tree, but serving those who are afflicted. During Christmas in this Year of Mercy, let’s pray to become Christmas people in that sense—to become mercy people. We live in an era increasingly hostile to such a mission: the world wants us to believe that Christmas is about materialism, inwardness, and gluttony—and that the season of selfishness can go on all year. But Mercy Incarnate taught us to go far outside ourselves: feed, clothe, and shelter the poor; visit the sick and the imprisoned. This Christmas, let us recognize the depths of God’s big work of Christmas mercy, and ask God to strengthen us in small works of mercy, so that like Scrooge, we can learn to keep Christmas well all year long. God bless us, every one.



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