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The Ghosts of Christmas Present

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Of all the actors who have taken on the character of Charles Dickens's Ebenezer Scrooge, by far the best was the late Alistair Sim, a quintessentially English collage of wispy gray hair, watery eyes, and bad teeth. Throughout his long career, Sim also frequented the role of the stereotypical country vicar, a slightly befuddled anachronism irrelevant to the world around him.

Approaching the twilight of his life, Sim's Scrooge is a tormented, friendless man. His unlikely savior will be the ghost of his late business partner, Jacob Marley, shackled to the ancient accounts and musty ledgers that now, unseen, bind Scrooge as well.

Of the trinity of specters that follow, the ghost of Christmas past is the most benevolent, a conjurer of childhood memories adorned with festive Yuletide trappings. The memories are idealized and highly selective — youthful friends, a loving sister, and quaint mentors. Few elicit the loneliness of the boarding school; none linger on the grinding poverty and early death which remained the lot of the poor in Dickens's England.

The Christmas ghosts of *my* youth are also selective, the war that is their stage-set seen through a lens darkly — flickering black and white images of weeks-old events in foreign places with exotic names. When there was wartime privation, my Depression-acclimated parents simply took it in stride — gas rationing, home canning, back yard “victory gardens” apparently intended solely for growing oversized zucchini for patriotic children to drag around the neighborhood in little red wagons. In the church, the Litany was used more frequently... “From battle and murder, and from sudden death, Good Lord deliver us . . .,” but most offices and sacraments remained essentially the same, their efficacy unquestioned.

Thus most of my Incarnational apparitions appear framed by the choir stalls of my home parish, my vantage point for midnight services during my stint as a soprano soloist. They are comforting wraiths, redolent of hot candle wax and freshly laundered choir robes, kaleidoscopes of scarlet poinsettias and polished brass and the magnificent cloth-of-gold vestments of the clergy. And beyond the sanctuary, counterpoint to these splendors, a host of unscripted rituals play themselves out against a background of primal sound . . . scattered coughing, oaken kneelers being lowered, poorly muted asides, the ordinary and the mundane — the dramas of *the people*.

Of these common-man cameos, several remain indelible. In the soprano section of the choir, Virginia, an oversized teenage girl of apparently delicate constitution, could always be depended upon to faint in the middle of the interminable Prayer (said kneeling) For The Whole State of Christ's Church. Even before the unmistakable “clump” of her “passing” had ceased to echo through the nave, two of the basses would rise to their feet, solemnly genuflect in front of the altar, and haul Virginia's very limp and very large body “off stage.” The following Sunday, she would be in her accustomed place, apparently unembarrassed by her fall from grace.

Another side-show staple was Cecile, a slightly out-of-focus waif whose High Church mother had instilled in her the eternal truth that women are to have their hair covered in God's House. Clearly the work of the Devil, Cecile's tacky lace “choir doily” always managed to fall off somewhere between

vesting room and pew. Desperately seeking to avoid the displeasure of the Almighty, Cecile would gamely improvise, somehow managing to kneel, stand, and juggle hymnal and sheet music while grimly holding one hand firmly on top of her head.

If these were diversionary comedies, George was a morality play. For George, the war had come home. An off-again-on-again alcoholic since the death of his son at Pearl Harbor, George would arrive at 9:00 PM for the final choir rehearsal. Even cold sober, he was a distinctive presence, a huge craggy-faced man with gigantic salt-and-pepper eyebrows and a nose like the prow of a Viking ship. Three sheets to the wind, he would proceed to “trope the text” of the familiar carols, his booming voice assaulting heaven with such new and improved lyrics as, “Hark the herald angels sing, Frinzel’s Pills are just the thing. Peace on earth and mercy mild, Two for man and one for child!”

As a boy chorister, I was never privy to the apparently unsavory process by which George was rendered fit for public display, but by the time the crucifer began to lead the choir down the aisle to the strains of “Joy to the World,” George had usually achieved at least a modicum of sobriety, enough so that his grief was now even more acute. During the Eucharistic Prayer, George would bury his head in his arms and sob quietly while the men flanking him would put their hands on his shoulders and mumble words of comfort.

I remember those moments now as integral to the liturgy, not alien to the solemnity of the occasion but embodiments of fragile humanity, affirming the reason for Christmas as surely as the images of abiding shepherds and the sounds of angelic hosts. It was the Redemptive Community of a sort which I would later come to equate with my years in seminary, but rarely experienced thereafter.

As the spirits of present and future materialize in turn before him, Scrooge must face the realization that the values he has espoused all his adult life no longer serve him. In the afternoon if not the twilight of my own life, I find myself haunted by similar shades, doleful entities bowed beneath creeds and concepts whose archaic imagery — “ascended into heaven,” “descended into hell,” death as punishment for sin — was put to rest by Galileo and Darwin. It is with great sadness that I find the classic formularies — Incarnation, Atonement, Trinity — no longer serve *me*, nor make sense to me, as they stand, in the face of what I have come to understand about the natural world and the human condition. In this I feel I am far from alone, but have no way of knowing, save from the closest of friends.

There is a reason for this. As Victorian England kept its unruly masses out of sight, continuing to send them into exile at Botany Bay lest they soil the elegant fabric of society, so the twenty-first century Church seems loath to acknowledge the untidy netherworld of theological doubt inhabited by many of its flock. Yet if the church of the Incarnation, or its concept, is to truly redeem our humanity, it must minister to *all* of it; souls warmed by the traditional assurances of our youth, *and* minds and consciences wrestling with the conflicting but undeniable realities of the present.

Ultimately, through his ghosts, Scrooge finds redemption, a place at his nephew’s table. At our Redemptive Table, there must be room for our ghosts as well, a place for doubting Thomas as well as confessional Peter.

God bless us, everyone.



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