

# A Christmas Carol Remixed

Readings: Isaiah 9:2,6-7; Philippians 2:3-11; Luke 2:8-20

Christmas is a time for traditions, things are done in a particular way. It is one of the joys of Christmas but it can also cause tensions when traditions change or a challenged say because you have got married or the in laws are coming this year. We don't like Christmas changed or transformed. But Christmas traditions have been changing throughout history, and it can be fascinating to chart such changes.

Arguably nothing has been more powerful in the traditions of the modern Christmas than the publication of a book in the week before Christmas in 1843, *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. It was an instant best seller and style setter. It helped transform the older tradition of 12 days of binge drinking and anti social behaviour, which sadly has a distinctly modern sound, to what we think of as Christmas. No longer a riotous time but a righteous time; a kind and generous time, which was focused on family.

From Dickens we have traditions focused on turkey, carol singing, snow, church bells, mulled wine, charitable donations and Christmas pudding. This was a book which rewrote the book on what Christmas had been like and should be like.

## Transformation at Christmas

But Dicken's aim was not to transform Christmas and create traditions but to transform people. The wonderfully named Ebenezer Scrooge, a monstrous miser, is visited on Christmas Eve by the Ghost of Christmas Past who reminds him of the joy that once was there; the Ghost of Christmas Present who shows him how hard Christmas is now for some to whom he should have been more generous; and finally the Ghost of Christmas Future who shows him both the ongoing effect of such poverty and, with extended skeletal finger, his own grave, unmourned and untended despite his great wealth. Chastened and terrified, Scrooge wants to know is this what will be or may be? Returned to the present, he is transformed into a man with generous ways towards others and a lighter heart in himself and his future is a lot brighter.

The message of *A Christmas Carol* is still a powerful one in turning from greed and materialism, from selfishness and avarice, as seen in the many different modern retellings ranging from *The Muppets Christmas Carol*, the Jim Carrey animation, or recent chick flick *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past*.

Perhaps in these troubled financial times, a copy of the book should be sent to the CEO and board members of each bank as they consider what bonuses to award themselves. Or a copy should go to all the world leaders so they may wonder what the ghost of Christmas future would show them of low lying Pacific Islands and Central Africa sacrificed on the altar of ever growing economies, is this what will be or may be?

But for all of us in this time of financial stress when we can be so caught up thinking about money it may have a role to play in transforming our thinking in the present to think of Christmas past and future.

Its message is also profoundly biblical. In one of the traditional readings for Christmas the Apostle Paul says "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." It is a verse that should be the

death to the Scrooge in us all, and confront us with the challenge of transformation. Christmas as in *A Christmas Carol* reminds us and holds out the possibility of personal transformation to a different way of living.

But as powerful as Dickens' story is, there is a far more powerful story to be told at Christmas and it is this that is the basis of Paul's thinking. For Paul says that we are to be like this as we imitate Christ Jesus. What ultimately will transform us is not about a fable about ghosts but the truth about a King, King Jesus. Jesus the King of Christmas Past, the Jesus the King of Christmas Future, and Jesus the King of Christmas Present. This is a story that transformed history and will transform history and if we will truly listen will truly transform us as well.

### **THE JESUS OF CHRISTMAS PAST**

There can be little doubt that from the start the Gospel of Luke wants us to understand that Jesus comes as King. The Angel Gabriel tells Mary that her child "will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." (Luke 1:32-33) It would be hard to top that for King language, it has an element of "read my lips about it", five ideas of a mighty ruler.<sup>1</sup>

In the Christmas readings "Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ, the Lord." (Luke 2:11) In Jesus, God is keeping his promises of a King who would bring salvation, forgiveness and peace. Though Jesus comes in humility, the manger truly is a King Sized Bed.

And just in case we think that this is just a religious concept Luke makes sure that he places his story in the midst of the reign of King Herod (1:5), and Caesar Augustus (2:1). Augustus liked to be known as "The Saviour of the World" and who closed the Temple of War in Rome. Luke is clearly saying that the true King, the true Saviour, the true bringer of peace is not to be found in Rome or even Jerusalem, but in a food trough, in a stable out the back of the local pub in a provincial backwater.

I was once told that there is one thing that Australians don't talk about: religion and politics. But here we see that they are in fact one thing completely intertwined in the Christmas story. Perhaps that is why it is so hard to talk about the true meaning of Christmas, because it is all about religion and politics. It is about the true God acting in history and showing his power and revealing his true King.

This moves the story of a baby and animals and angels on to a whole new level, it is about Jesus, the King of Christmas Past.

Throughout the rest of Luke's Gospel Jesus is presented as royalty reaching a crescendo as the Gospel reaches its conclusion. Jesus comes into Jerusalem as God's King, is greeted by the crowds as the King, and is ultimately arrested, tried and executed for his claim to be the King. Once again religion and politics. As he dies the crowds, the soldiers, the condemned all ask him if he really is the Christ, the King, for his death seems to be the end of that story.

But the resurrection of Jesus is God's way of saying in the midst of history, that Jesus really is the King whose kingdom will never end. Religion ultimately triumphs over politics. This message of the Kingdom is one that is to be spread through all the earth, and Jesus takes his rightful place at God's right hand.

It is the birth of this glorious, triumphant King that we celebrate this day.

### **THE JESUS OF CHRISTMAS FUTURE**

But getting this right pushes us forward to Jesus as the King of Christmas future. For the Bible again is quite clear about what it means for Jesus to be God's anointed and risen King. One day all will recognise Jesus as the King whether they like it or not.

<sup>1</sup> Three are obvious and two require some knowledge of Old Testament (OT) language usage. The five are Son of Most High = King of Israel in OT; throne; father David = the royal line of the OT; reign for ever; kingdom never ending.

Paul says that because of what Jesus has done “God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Philippians 2:8-11

An irony of my life is that I didn't follow my father into the medical profession because I can be a bit squeamish, but I have discovered that being a pastor means that I am often told about people's health issues in intimate and frankly revolting detail. Now often as people tell me about their physical state the conversation involves their knees. Dicky knees, clicky knees, gunky knees, new knees.

Have a think about your knees for a moment. What kind of knees are they? At this point I was going to ask everyone to show each other their knees but my wife advised me that it would look like some strange religious ritual and start a rather strange new Christmas tradition.

But I want to ask you to think about where are they? That may seem like a very strange question, as they are obviously in the middle of your legs. But remember what Paul says, every knee in heaven or in earth or under the earth will bow before Jesus. It kind of covers all options doesn't it, up there, down below or here. So wherever your knees are, whoever you are one day you will bow before Jesus, and you will confess him as Lord.

How do you feel about that future? This baby whose birthday we celebrate this day we will all proclaim as King. We may face this day with fear, it is known as the day of judgement. It is a far more terrifying prospect than that of Dickens' Ghost of Christmas Future. It will mean being before Jesus the mighty king before whom all hearts are open all desires known and before whom no secrets are hidden. As we consider such a day we, like Scrooge, may ask if this is what *will* happen, or what *may* happen.

## THE JESUS OF CHRISTMAS PRESENT

That depends on what you do with the Jesus, the King of Christmas Present. For as we gather this Christmas is not just a past reality and a future reality, he is present, and is now reigning and he longs for us to take him as our King. Remember the words of the angel, this saviour was born for you, it is something we have to take for ourselves. For this is what it truly is to be a Christian, to take Jesus as our King, as our Lord, to turn to Christ. It is much easier to manage the manger but we are to crown him as King in our life

I need to ask have you done this, or do you ignore him and run you own life as if Jesus was not really the King. Please remember your knees.

But when we do, when we truly understand that he is the King of the Christmas Present, then we receive the gifts he came to bring, he is the King of Christmas Presents.

### **The Gift of Forgiveness**

Firstly there is forgiveness. Jesus came to save us from our sins. This means that we no longer face Jesus King of Christmas Future with fear but with glorious hope, because we know we are forgiven, our slate is wiped clean. What a gift!

### **The Gift of Eternal Life**

As a consequence of taking Jesus as our King there is eternal life as a gift. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16) A life in which there will be no more mourning or crying or pain, but all will be restored, renewed, reborn. All as a present!

### **The Gift of Presence**

Lastly there is the present of his presence. Jesus has promised to be with his people, to never leave them or forsake, and that in Jesus nothing in all creation can

separate us from the love of God. We then share our life with our King who came and shared in ours at Christmas.

Grasping all this will have the same transforming effect on us as the ghostly visitations had on Scrooge. Knowledge of God's love will change us and will lead us to love others, and no longer be focused on self and power and greed, but rather grace, kindness, compassion and generosity. As we follow our King of Christmas present we will look different from the kingdoms of this world as we seek to serve others, following a path that would not only transform ourselves but our community and our society. Once again Christmas is ultimately about religion and politics.

Here then is my remixed Christmas Carol, Jesus, the King of Christmas Past, King of Christmas Future and King of Christmas Present. A powerful message which changes Christmas from a time of traditions to transformation for those who will hear the message of the angels that to us is born a saviour who is Christ the Lord, through whom God will bless us, everyone.



ETERNAL LIFE, MY FAVORITE ... THANKS JESUS!