

*The night is far spent, the day is at hand; let us therefore cast off the works of darkness and let us put on the armour of light.*

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Like Jacob Marley in A Christmas Carol, Advent comes with the haunting refrain of *Prepare to meet Christ! Let us cast off the works of darkness! The night is far spent, the day is at hand!* Jacob Marley provides a wonderful illustration for this first Sunday in Advent. We know the story well. Marley comes, like Advent, as a stark reminder to the Ebenezer Scrooge's of this world what happens to men who are consumed with the works of darkness, who are driven by greed, with no love for their fellowman or for God.

For Scrooge, Christmas was just another day, a forced holiday, a day to lose money, and a day empty of any meaning. It all changes once the ghost of Jacob Marley appears, the longtime business associate of Scrooge, looking much the way he did in life, but bound in chains. Dickens writes, *Marley in his...usual waistcoat, tights, and boots...the chain he drew was clasped about his middle. It was long and wound about him like a tail; and it was made (for Scrooge observed it closely) of cashboxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses wrought in steel.* Marley speaks the most important lines in the whole story, when Scrooge asks Marley about his chains and Marley replies: *I wear the chain I forged in life... I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it.* And then Scrooge is told of the chain that is being made for himself. *"Or would you know...the weight and length of the strong coil you bear yourself? It was full as heavy and as long as this, seven Christmas Eves ago. You have laboured on it, since. It is a ponderous chain!"*

Scrooge tries to commend Marley, that he was a good businessman, probably the most important virtue for the worldly, but Marley corrects Scrooge and reminds him that he should have been occupied in much more serious business. Marley says, *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!"* Marley wasted his life. He pursued only money and material gain at the expense and neglect of loving His God or His neighbor.

We know well how the Christmas Carol ends, Scrooge is taken on a supernatural journey to past, present, and future, and what he is shown encourages him to repent of his selfish, greedy, and sinful life, and he casts off his chains, his *works of darkness*. His life is transformed from the Scrooge we saw in the beginning of the story. There are certain details that often get overlooked in the movie adaptations of the Christmas Carol, but the original book tells how Scrooge not just repents but makes amends. He gives to the poor, he helps to change lives for the better, and he returns to the church.

We find another parallel in the Gospel for this morning. The greed and darkness that had once hardened Scrooge's heart had infiltrated the Temple, the heart of Jerusalem. And while Jesus draws near on His triumphal entry into the city, while the crowds sing Hosanna and wave palm branches, the priests and money changers are in the temple making money from the sacrifices of the poor people. They had monetized the worship of God, only agreeing to sacrifice those animals that had been bought in the Temple. The Temple had become so distracted by greed and materialism, that it was not prepared to meet Jesus when He came walking through the door. What does Jesus do? The Jesus who just entered Jerusalem as royalty, that nice image of Christ on Palm Sunday which in a way coincides with the image of the cherubic infant in our manger scenes, is a vision more intense than Jacob Marley in his chains. He goes into the Temple and casts out the money changers, both those who bought and sold, He overturns tables. In St. John's account He even makes a whip to drive the money changers out. He purifies the Temple saying, *it is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves.*

The Gospel for today ends on that note, *My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves.* If we take this Gospel just as it is presented in the prayerbook it paints a stark image of Jesus, but it was not the end of the story. The next few verses read: *And the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple; and He healed them. And when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying in the temple, and saying, Hosanna to the Son of David; they were sore displeased, and said unto him, Hearest thou what these say? And Jesus saith unto them, Yea; have ye never read, Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise?* Jesus does not just cleanse the Temple, He does not just cast off the works of darkness that had worked its way into the worship of God, He does not just rebuke the money changers, but He restores the true worship of God. The blind and the lame, who had likely never been allowed in the Temple due to their imperfections, were allowed to come to Jesus, into the Temple, and were healed. All while the inner courts and corridors, the Holy of Holies, the heart of Jerusalem, rang as children sang *Hosanna to the Son of David.*

We may interpret the blind and the lame that Jesus heals literally, and symbolically. Ebenezer Scrooge, Jacob Marley, the money changers in the Temple, the Temple priests and Pharisees, are the spiritually blind and lame. The same is true for any who are blinded and hobbled by their sins, by materialism, focusing more on what is popular and fashionable than on Jesus Christ. But unlike Charles Dickens's story, true healing, a true change of heart, is only found through coming to Jesus. This is the message and meaning of Advent; preparation, casting off the works of darkness, casting off our sins. Advent

aims to help us with this and more by encouraging us to get our souls in order to meet Jesus when He comes to us sacramentally on Christmas Day, when He comes again in glory at the end of the world, or when we go to meet Him at the end of our lives. But we must not overlook the other side of the message. With this preparation, this casting off the works of darkness and welcoming Christ into our hearts and lives, comes a spiritual transformation and newness of life. If we want to experience the true joy of Christmas, if we want to experience a kind of transformation which the secular world can only dream about, we must give ourselves completely to Christ. We must give ourselves completely to the love of God and to the love of our neighbors, this Advent.