

Ipswich Unitarians

THE MESSAGE OF 'THE CHIMES': DICKENS'S NEW YEAR MANIFESTO

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We enter a New Year that will see, next month, the bicentenary of the birth of Charles Dickens. He is, as he was in his own lifetime, a controversial, as well as a popular, figure. His genius as a writer has ensured his literary immortality, but he upset a lot of people too, and still does – and not without reason in some respects. But a detailed analysis of Dickens's life and character is beyond my remit today.

It is New Year's Day – a day for looking forward with hope and resolve – so in his bicentenary year, we may ask ourselves whether Dickens has anything to say to us at this particular time. I think he does.

Dickens's second Christmas Book, 'The Chimes', is actually a New Year story. It was published in December 1844 and, like, 'A Christmas Carol', a year earlier, it was a sensation – but not in quite the same way. The 'Carol' (as it had generally become known) contained some strong social comment, some demanding challenges to a society where wealth and abject poverty existed side by side, but it left people with a warm seasonal glow. 'The Chimes' is rather different.

'The Chimes' is an angry book. Its fury against injustice and a corrupt, uncaring political system boils over at times into what sounds like a revolutionary manifesto:

"The voice of Time...cries to man, Advance! Time IS for his advancement and improvement; for his greater worth, his greater happiness, his better life... Ages of darkness, wickedness, and violence, have come and gone: millions uncountable have suffered, lived, and died: to point the way before him. Who seeks to turn him back, or stay him in his course, arrests a mighty engine which will strike the meddler dead; and be the fiercer and the wilder, ever, for its momentary check." (Third Quarter)

And it is those "meddlers", standing in the path of Time and "man's improvement", who are the targets of, 'The Chimes'. That is to say, the politicians, the industrialists, the bankers, the speculators, the capitalists, the right-wing social, political and economic theoreticians, and anyone else who supported, presided over, or was part of, the establishment in the midst of the "hungry 'forties". And Dickens didn't just attack generalised targets, he attacked specific ones. Those characters in, 'The Chimes', who represent an inhuman system, are thinly-veiled lampoons of real, recognisable individuals who would have been well-known to many of Dickens's readers.

The Conservative press gave, 'The Chimes', a hostile reception, whereas the Radical press were in raptures, but what of the Unitarian reaction, given that Dickens was himself a Unitarian by this time? The Unitarian paper, 'The Inquirer', was cautious, clearly unnerved by the fury of, 'The Chimes'. While welcoming the book and recognising that, as the reviewer writes, it, "...has treated of very serious subjects in a manner that unites playfulness of the imagination with...minute pencilling and homely truthfulness..." he goes on to say of its author that, although:

"We cannot doubt that he will carry along with him the vast majority of his countless readers...A danger may be imagined of his powerfully-drawn pictures of distress, and the injustices which causes or neglects it, awakening indignation, and tending to widen the breach between the different classes of society..." (The Inquirer, 21st December 1844)

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The 'Inquirer' review betrays nervousness that, in a time of social unrest and incipient revolution, 'The Chimes' might be the spur that would bring people to the barricades! So the reviewer continues in terms themselves more reforming than revolutionary:

"...we hope it is more probable...that those of easy circumstances will be made more thoughtful towards the poor, and more ready to hold out a helping hand..."

But 'The Inquirer' doesn't make the mistake of saying that charity alone can solve the problem. Its review of, 'The Chimes', concludes:

"The chief remedies for our social evils must be sought for in the application of just political principles."

So what is, 'The Chimes', all about? Like the 'Carol' (and much else in Dickens's work), it is the story of a man's transformation – his redemption, if you like. And again, as in the 'Carol', this is the work of supernatural spirits, only this time they are the inhabitants of a set of church bells. As in the 'Carol', these spirits – the eponymous 'Chimes' – represent the awakening of the mind and the conscience. They go to work on the central character, show him grim visions of the future, which are drawn from what was actually going on in a depression-ravaged country, and so bring about in him a fundamental and saving change.

But Toby – or, Trotty – Veck is no Ebenezer Scrooge. He is a poor man, just about scraping a living, and a loving man towards his family – a daughter and her fiancé. So what needs to be changed in Trotty Veck? It is what might be called his false consciousness – a combination of socially conservative politics and conservative religion. Trotty Veck is well-aware of the sufferings of the poor and of the impact of the prevailing political and economic system on his own family, but he has convinced himself that his misfortunes are his own fault and that the misfortunes of the poor in general are their own fault. A combination of political propaganda and the doctrine of Original Sin has persuaded Trotty Veck that he and his fellow-sufferers under oppression deserve all they get. As he reflects, in words that echo the General Confession in the Book of Common Prayer:

"...I am not even able to make up my mind whether there is any good at all in us, or whether we are born bad."

His thoughts continue:

"We seem to do dreadful things; we seem to give a deal of trouble; we are always being complained of and guarded against... supposing it should really be that we have no right to a New Year – supposing we really are intruding." (First Quarter)

By "we", Trotty Veck means his own social class, the labouring poor, the unemployed, those driven to political violence, or crime, or prostitution, or murder, or suicide, out of the desperation of their situation. All these responses are represented among the characters in, 'The Chimes'. Trotty Veck's attitude to the unfeeling representatives of the ruling class, on the other hand, is one of unquestioning subservience. The journey the spirits of the Chimes take him on reveals to him the falsity of his viewpoint, laying bare the horrors of poverty and injustice, and showing him who is truly responsible for them – namely, the corrupt hypocrites at whose feet Trotty has worshipped hitherto.

Although, in 'The Chimes', Dickens may sound like a Marxist revolutionary, his motivation – as always – is Christian, albeit a Christianity that is liberal in its theology and humanist in its ethics. He denounces those who, falsely, make of the Christian Church (represented by the Chimes themselves) an ally of the oppressor. As the Chimes tell Trotty Veck, berating him for his willingness to listen to the lies of the ruling class:

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“Who hears in us, the Chimes, one note bespeaking disregard...of any hope, or joy, or pain, or sorrow, of the many-sorrowed throng; who hears us make response to any creed that gauges human passions and affections, as it gauges the amount of miserable food on which humanity may pine and wither; does us wrong. That wrong you have done us!”

And then Dickens puts into the mouths of the Chimes a quite extraordinary condemnation, but one that has its roots in words of Jesus in Matthew’s gospel (Dickens’s favourite, apparently) that conclude with this denunciation of self-righteous religious and political authorities: “Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell.” (Matthew 23: 33) Dickens, clearly inspired by these words, gives them this interpretation in the voice of the Chimes:

“Who hears us echo the dull vermin of the earth: the Putters Down of crushed and broken natures, formed to be raised up higher than such maggots...can conceive...does us wrong. And you have done us wrong!” (Third Quarter)

I don’t suppose the real-life targets of Dickens’s fury much liked being called, “the dull vermin of the earth”, the “maggots of the time”, and you can see why, ‘The Chimes’, was seen by them – and others too – more as an incendiary manifesto than as a charming tale for Christmas 1844!

The story ends happily, though, for the sympathetic characters within it, and we are treated to a typically Dickensian New Year party, but Dickens doesn’t let his readers – and that includes us, at the beginning of his bicentenary year – off the hook. He addresses us directly; with reference to, “the evils that the spirits have revealed”:

“...oh Listener...try to bear in mind the stern realities from which these shadows come; and in your sphere – none is too wide, and none too limited for such an end – endeavour to correct, improve, and soften them.” (Fourth Quarter)

But having admonished us, Dickens greets us - and with that greeting (and my own) I will close:

“So may the New Year be a Happy one to You, Happy to many more whose Happiness depends on You! So may each Year be happier than the last, and not the meanest of our brethren or sisterhood debarred their rightful share, in what our Great Creator formed them to enjoy.”

To which I say, Amen.
