

Christmas (2018) - A Christmas Miracle

Long ago something very special happened, very wonderful.

Even though we may know the story well it is good to retell it: to recount the Christmas Miracle.

I'm not referring to the stable in Bethlehem, to the birth of Jesus, to the visit of shepherds, or the Magi, or to the song of Angels above - but the story is connected to that event.

It took place in the mud-filled trenches of Flanders in the first World War. In fact it happened at Christmas in 1914, just a few months into that dreadful conflict.

Around sundown on a cold a frosty Christmas Eve the shelling and rifle fire died down until every gun was silent. After months of thundering artillery and crackling fusillades the silence was extraordinary.

One of the British soldiers standing guard at midnight, Private Peter Goudge, was alert for any sound from the enemy lines. Suddenly he was startled to hear the German troops singing their traditional Carol: *Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht - Silent Night, Holy Night*. Goudge started to sing along himself in the English words he knew so well, and soon the other men standing alongside him joined in. When that Carol was sung out the British troops gave voice to 'O come all ye faithful'. The singing spread along the Western Front - recent enemies could be heard singing their Christmas hymns, in French, English, German, Belgian - joining each other.

Private Goudge was even more startled when he saw a lone German soldier carefully picking his way across the barbed wire and shell holes of 'No Man's Land', while holding aloft a tiny Christmas tree bright with flickering candles. Near to the British trenches he called out 'A happy Christmas to you!' The British troops roared back: 'A happy Christmas to you!'

The Germans then shouted: 'Come out - we will not shoot for Christmas!' Timidly, warily, the British troops climbed out of their trenches and advanced unarmed to greet yesterday's mortal enemies. Some of the soldiers laughed, others cried when they embraced each other.

Along hundreds of miles of trenches the Christmas spirit caught on quickly. Christmas Day dawned to the remarkable sight of formerly hostile soldiers exchanging gifts, good wishes, and songs. Football matches took place between teams from opposing armies. Photos were taken. It was difficult to imagine that a terrible war had been raging between these armies for five months. The Spirit of reconciliation and good will filled the day. Toasts were offered from whatever drinks could be found - for home, for family, for friends - but mostly for Peace.

As evening fell the soldiers of the various armies began to trickle back slowly to their trenches. Tears and embraces marked the parting of thousands of men who had known peace on earth - if only for a day. The Christmas Miracle of 1914 had ended.

Military High Commands in all armies took severe measures to ensure that warring troops should not fraternise again in the future. There were no more Christmas Miracles for the rest of World War I. Instead the lives of millions were lost in a relentless conflagration before Peace was finally attained in 1918. For those soldiers who had participated in it, the day the war stopped for Christ's birthday was a cherished memory - which they took with them to their graves.

The reason I retell that story is in part because this year marked the hundredth anniversary of the Armistice and we have all - from the oldest to the youngest amongst us - been reminded of the appalling and lasting consequences of selfish ambition and belligerence.

But also I tell that story because it illustrates the remarkable power of good will, of mutual trust, of forgiveness, of generosity of spirit - to achieve a time of peace in the midst of the worst of wars. It is this on which we must focus - how grace can overcome sin, goodness banish evil.

As you may know, the word 'disaster' (*dis-aster - astro/aster (Gk) astrum - astra (L) > star/stars*) literally means 'to fall away from the stars'. If we lose faith in God, and hope in man; if we give up the spirit of mutual service that *binds us together* then we will soon know what it is to be in that dark abyss which is the consequence of narrow-mindedness, greed and lies.

But if we continue to aspire to what is worthy, to what is noble, to what is honest and true; if we strive to express the best of our humanity in caring for one another - especially those most in need; if we keep ourselves open to the promptings of the Spirit of God then we can rise to the 'heights'.

We need to lift our gaze - as Wise Men do - to the stars, if we want to move away from the Hell that selfishness brings about and gradually enter once more into the fellowship that is a foretaste of Heaven.

The Feast of Christmas is a time to renew our fervour for all that is good and to express our charity in every way we can. The wonderful event of the birth of Jesus, *Emmanuel, God with us*, encourages us to have confidence in God's love for us despite our sinfulness, and to trust that we can build up the Kingdom of God here on earth: peace in place of war.