

## Christmas Eve Homily

### Redeeming Grace

Christmas is about Transformation

From fear to joy

From shepherds to evangelists

From a feed trough to a cradle

From a young peasant girl to the Mother of God

From importance to humility

A blessed disruption that sends us home by another way.

That brings peace on earth and goodwill to all of humanity.

This is the dawn of redeeming grace - a grace that will never leave us in the same state it found us in.

Gloria in excelsis Deo.

### Christmas Truce of 1914

Bruce Bairnsfather was crouched in a ditch - three feet deep and three feet wide. It was Christmas Eve, 1914 and Bruce was stationed along the Western Front in Belgium, one of the men of the 1st Battalion of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment fighting in the first world war.

The Western Front spanned hundreds of miles across Belgium, France, and Switzerland. Over one million allied forces were stationed along this front in December of 1914.

“Here I was, in this horrible clay cavity,” Bairnsfather wrote, “...miles and miles from home. Cold, wet through and covered with mud.” There didn’t “seem the slightest chance of leaving—except in an ambulance.”

Then, around 10 pm, Bruce heard something from the German side of the battlefield. Through the darkness, across the barbed wire strewn “No Man’s Land”, he could hear the murmur of voices. He asked one of his fellow soldiers if he heard it too. The Germans were singing Christmas Carols. As the night pressed around them, some of the British soldiers began to sing as well.

Suddenly, a new chorus of confused shouting arose from the German side. The British troops stopped singing and a stillness blanketed them. Then, a single voice, speaking English with a heavy German accent, cried out: “Come over here!”

After a short silence, someone from the British side answered: “You come halfway, I’ll come halfway.”

Miraculously, they did. In spontaneous and unsanctioned cease-fires across the Western Front, the Christmas Truce of 1914 began just that way. Soldiers who had, just hours before, been shooting at each other, greeted one another with handshakes and kind words. They traded tobacco, songs, and wine - there are reports of soccer games played on Christmas Day with, at least on one occasion, over one hundred or so players participating in a “general kick about” on icy grounds.

Laughter replacing gunfire. Friendship - however short-lived - replacing enmity. Some of the ceasefires were said to have lasted days.

Bairnsfather said it this way: “Here they were—the actual, practical soldiers of the German army. There was not an atom of hate on either side.”

Another British soldier, named John Ferguson, recalled it this way: “Here we were laughing and chatting to men whom only a few hours before we were trying to kill!”

Other accounts recall witnessing enemy soldiers helping one another gather and bury their dead. At least one group held a joint service for German and Allied fallen soldiers.

A German Lieutenant recalled: “How marvelously wonderful, yet how strange it was. The English officers felt the same way about it. Thus Christmas, the celebration of Love, managed to bring mortal enemies together as friends for a time.”

It is impossible to know just how many soldiers took part in the Christmas Truce of 1914 - it happened haphazardly in small pockets across hundreds of miles - but one article celebrating the 100 year anniversary of the event estimated that as many as 100,000 soldiers participated.

Of course, not everyone was pleased by the Truce. High Commanders of all the armies were outraged. Some suggested that any soldier that had been a part of the truce should be punished. All agreed that it could never happen again.

Even some of the men on the ground disagreed with the spirit of the truce. There is a report of a German who scolded his fellow soldiers during the Christmas Truce: “Such a thing should not happen in wartime. Have you no German sense of honor left?” That 25-year old soldier’s name was Adolf Hitler.

After the high commanders took charge and began to order the troops back to the trenches, Sergeant G. H. Morgan of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment wrote: “It was as if we had decided to end the fighting all by ourselves. Could it really have happened like this? If all the troops, all along the line had refused to fight - on both sides - would the war have ended there and then? If we had all walked away at that point, could the result have been a truce? I doubt it. But it’s a thought.”

From swords into plowshares, from machine guns to soccer balls. God makes the first move, again and again, inviting us to participate in a better kind of kingdom.

The story of the Christmas Truce has inspired people for over 100 years. It’s breathtaking to think of what is possible when people respond to the invitation of God’s Redeeming Grace.

Christmas is about transformation.

From war to peace

From enemy to friend

From soldier to human being.

But we always have the choice - will we allow it? will we pay attention? Will we hear the carols on the wind and have the courage to come out from our hiding place, to risk connection?

Wherever we are on this night - whether we sit in grief, anxiety, stress or joy, peace, and calm - or a mixture of all of those,

God's Redeeming Grace is available and actively working in the world. And Grace will never leave you in the same state it found you in.

On this silent and holy night, may we - and may the world - open ourselves to the dawn breaking through the darkness and choose to sing.