

12-24-23 Christmas Eve Vigil. 2010

Fr. Joseph

It was Christmas Eve, 1914. Not a typical Oklahoma Christmas like we have here tonight, cold and damp, but a really deep frozen Belgian Christmas -- an icicles-hanging-off-the-nose kind of Christmas. Even though there was no formal truce of any kind, the German soldiers began to light candles in the trenches and singing Christmas Carols: "Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht, alles schlaeft, einsam wacht . . .". The British soldiers, having seen the lights in the German trenches, initially assumed that the Germans were preparing some kind of attack; but when they started singing, they paused, and listened. And when the Germans finished, they cheered and applauded. Then the Brits began to sing back familiar English carols: "What child is this who laid to rest in Mary's lap is sleeping . . .". Heads began popping out of the trenches under flags of truce on both sides. Soon, the soldiers started coming out of the trenches and meeting in the no man's land in between -- soldiers who, only a few minutes before had been bent upon taking one another's lives were exchanging food items, and improvising gifts to share. On that bitter cold winter night, among men whose lives had been given up and thrown away by their respective nations as cannon fodder for the Great War, the infant Christ child came among them, and for as long as they

held him in their hearts, peace reigned.

Christ always comes to those places where human lives have been cast aside as waste. As the gospels tell the story of Jesus' earthly life, we see him time and time again in the company of sinners, prostitutes, lepers, tax collectors . . . . People who were of no account, whose lives, in one way or another, had been tossed aside and thrown away by the world in which they lived. Indeed, St. Luke begins his birth narrative by placing the baby Jesus in such a throw-away place: a barn, wrapped in rags, and laid in a food trough meant for the animals.

We have gotten so used to seeing Christmas cards and paintings of the Christ child in the manger that we've come to see it as a endearing and comforting image: The little Christ child, bathed in the glow of an ethereal light, lying in a makeshift hay-lined cradle while the animals kneel in worship around him. But I think St. Luke intended us to see a far starker, far more bleak image: That of a very pregnant young girl who, after hours and hours of riding on a donkey, even as her labor came on, couldn't find a soul who would offer them a place to rest, a quiet spot in which to give birth. She was a person of such little account that she was sent out to the barn to give birth among the noises and smells of the animals, given only rags in which

to wrap her newborn babe, whose first resting-place was no more than a trough where the household rubbish was fed to the animals.

Yet this little tiny babe brings peace, a peace that the world cannot give, a peace that fills the depths carved out by human suffering and poverty to overflowing, a peace that is stronger even than the guns of war -- as long as we allow it to remain in our hearts.

The great Episcopal theologian, William Porcher DuBose wrote, "God Incarnate in Jesus Christ is only half of the mystery of the Incarnation. God in us is the full other half." Two-thousand years ago, in Bethlehem, peace came into the world, incarnate in Jesus Christ. One-hundred-nine years ago on this very night, on the battlefields of WWI, that same Jesus came into the hearts of men and brought peace with him for as long as they allowed him to remain with them.

Tonight we sing many of the same songs that those soldiers sang to welcome the infant Jesus into their hearts. Tonight, on this Christmas Eve, we welcome the infant Jesus into our hearts. May he reign there forever!