

December 25, 2016 Christmas Peace Homily: Brothers and sisters, Merry Christmas!

A moment in time: December 24th, 1914. The World was at war. It was the first world war of the twentieth century. A generation later, a second war would follow. In the first three months of the conflict, a staggering nine hundred thousand soldiers fell in battle. A monumental tragedy was slowly, though inexorably, unfolding. But on that memorable night the spirit of Christmas managed to bring mortal enemies together, if only for a short time. Historians write of a “Christmas truce”, while men of faith refer to the incident as a miracle of “Christmas peace”.

Soldiers threw down their weapons and the blood stained killing field was turned into a field for play. Soldiers on both sides of the conflict gathered to sing "Silent Night" and to exchange food, drinks and tobacco. In the spirit of Christmas, soldiers treated their enemies as brothers, and not enemies to be killed. Not surprisingly, the generals opposed the temporary truce. They held firm that there should never be any fraternization with the enemy. They were largely ignored. As one soldier wrote to his mother living in England, “How can we take up arms against our enemy on the very day we commemorate the birth of the Prince of Peace?”

It all began when German soldiers lit candles on small Christmas trees. The sight of the brightly lit trees was enough to brighten the spirits of the soldiers on both sides of the trenches. Here one learns an important lesson: not even the brutality of warfare can suppress the joy of soldiers who celebrate Christmas. The good news of Christ's birth trumps the evils of war, destruction, violence and hatred!

One of the key themes of Christmas is peace. Consider: The child foretold by the prophet Isaiah is called the "Prince of Peace" (Is.9:5) and his kingdom is said to be one of endless peace (Is.9:6). The coming of Jesus was heralded by the father of John the Baptist, Zechariah, as “the one who would guide our steps into the way of peace” (Lk.1:79). The shepherds in the field hear the glad tidings, the angels’ hymn of praise and exaltation, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace” (Lk.2:14). Christmas brings joy and peace to those who, like the shepherds in Bethlehem, accept the angels’ words.

Christ gives himself to us and, in so doing, gives us his peace! As Pope Benedict reminds us, "He gives it to us so that we can carry the light of peace within and give it to others". Where God is denied or forgotten, there is no peace!

The Evangelist St. Luke includes the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus, the world's most powerful figure, in his narrative. According to historians, the Caesars maintained an uneasy peace for over 250 years. But true peace is not simply the absence of conflict... it is much more than that. The peace of Jesus is a peace the world *cannot* give. It denotes reconciliation, communion and the path of righteousness. The mystery of peace is linked to our salvation in Christ!

Among Catholics the word “Peace” has a particular meaning. It has become a word to designate communion in the Eucharist. There Christ's peace is present. Again, quoting Pope Benedict, “A great network of peace spreads throughout the world. The communities gathered around the Eucharist make up a kingdom of peace”.

Tellingly, Luke mentions one country in his narrative, Syria, a country now ravaged by civil war. One of the most striking images of the ongoing war is a community of Catholics gathered to celebrate Mass in their bombed out cathedral. To know “Christmas peace” amidst all the death and destruction of war is nothing less than amazing! Even as the bombs fall, the Christian hears the words of St. Paul: “Christ is our peace.” (Eph.2:14).

May the words “Lord, grant us peace!” which we pray at Mass, just prior to our reception of Him who is our Savior, be answered this Christmas day and every day of the season.

Amen!