

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by the Rev. James B. Craven, III on Christmas Day, December 25, 2010.

In the name of God-Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen.

A child is born to an unwed teenager in a little nothing hamlet in Palestine, and we celebrate the birth all over the world more than 2000 years later. It is simply remarkable. The baby was born in a manger, because there was no room in the inn. The very site in Bethlehem has been sacred from the beginning of Christianity. A church was built over the spot in the early 300s by the Emperor Constantine and much of it, including the altar, survives. The church escaped destruction in the 7th century by Muslim invaders because of the large mosaic depicting the three wise men in Persian garb. The news today will I am confident show us the massive crowds in Manger Square in Bethlehem last night, and perhaps the Grotto of the Nativity, where you have to kneel down to see the actual spot where we are told Jesus was born. You have to use your imagination because it is so built up and is anything but a pastoral scene today. But it is there and remembered, 2000 years later, at all times and in all places.

One of those places was in Flanders, along the border between France and Belgium, at Christmas 1914. Armies of two of Queen Victoria's grandsons, Wilhelm II and George V, faced off in a row of trenches in a war of attrition. All along the front, the first Christmas of the Great War, sometimes called the war to end all war, Christmas truces broke out. It didn't happen in later years, as the senior officers on both sides had gotten wise to such nonsense and put a stop to it. But the young soldiers and the look the other way junior officers

were at work unhindered on Christmas 1914. A Christmas tree would appear out of a German trench, and British soldiers would sing O Holy Night. The Germans would counter with Stille Nacht, Silent Night. Next a football would appear in no man's land between the trenches, then a soldier or two on each side. Before long it was a total outbreak of peace, temporary sure, but we take what we can get and try to learn from it. Small impromptu gifts were exchanged, a scarf or a pocket knife, cigarettes and a flask and Christmas rations were shared. Franz from Munich, Harold from Southampton, Heinrich from Berlin and Owen from Cardiff, young lads all, far from home for the first time in their lives at Christmas, many for their last Christmas on earth, showed each other pictures of girlfriends, wives, and mothers, and talked about the insanity of it all, and about the old men by the fires at home who had sent them there. It is neither a new phenomenon nor one that has completely disappeared. I am reminded of a bumper sticker of many years ago, "Suppose they gave a war and nobody came." The fine thin line between war and peace is interesting.

If T.S. Eliot in Murder in the Cathedral can be believed, and he should be, Thomas Becket's last sermon, on Christmas 1170 at Canterbury Cathedral, dealt with the juxtaposition of death and new life, of the birth of the child Jesus at Bethlehem and the martyrdom of Stephen, the first deacon of the Church, whose day the church calendar observes tomorrow. The great Epiphany hymn We Three Kings captures it all nicely, in its depiction of the gifts the wise men brought to the manger at Bethlehem:

Born a King on Bethlehem's plain,
gold I bring to crown him again, King for ever,
ceasing never, over us all to reign.

Frankincense to offer have I. Incense owns
a deity nigh. Prayer and praising, gladly
raising, worship him, God most high.

Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume, breaths a sigh of
gathering gloom. Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,
sealed in the stone cold tomb.

Not your ordinary baby presents, but then it all comes together in the last
verse:

Glorious now behold him arise,
King and God and Sacrifice.
Heaven sing alleluia, alleluia the earth replies.

So it all comes together, from the birth in the manger at Bethlehem, to Jesus' humanity and divinity, to the depths of Good Friday and the joy of Easter. Just as we commemorate and recreate it all this morning, at the altar here, just as it was done earlier today all over the world, at Canterbury, at Notre Dame in Paris, at the Cathedral in Khartoum, and at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, with Navy chaplains and corpsmen among the Marines in Afghanistan, with those in hospitals, and with those in prison, in the name of Christ, thanks be to God.

And a happy Christmas to all.

Amen.

St. Luke's
Christmas 2010