

St Peter's, Mount Park Road, Ealing

Midnight Mass

24<sup>th</sup> December 2014

Peace on earth, good will to all

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A century ago the Western powers had begun its first truly industrialised war and troops had been dying in considerable numbers in the fields of Northern France. We have seen the pictures and read the books or newspaper reports of this momentous anniversary.

A century ago tomorrow something quite extraordinary happened up and down the Western Front. Soldiers from both sides of the battlefields acknowledged an unofficial truce, initially to gather their dead and prepare them for burial. More than that happened as the troops came up out of their trenches, apprehensively at first, and engaged their opposite number, not with bayonets and bullets but with handshakes and shared good cheer. Some stories suggest football matches were held, often somewhat scrappily, food, cigarettes and conversation were shared. The guns were put down and fellowship was offered. There was a report this week of a great granddaughter, finding her great grandfather's papers and in them a card written to his wife-to-be explaining what had happened and including the names of two German soldiers he had met, evidence that this had happened and it wasn't just a flash in the pan.

An amazing thing to happen on such an aggressive field of battle. The Commanders back at HQ reprimanded the troops for their fraternisation but in the midst of this event, itself occurring in the midst of such violent and dehumanising bloodshed, something truly miraculous happened.

This War to end all wars' has done nothing of the sort. The disgusting carnage did change the world for ever it is true. In many ways it began our walk away from God. Bearing in mind the God that had been preached before and during the war it is not surprising. How can a God who says he is on our side allow this war to go on so long and allow so many deaths? How can a God who determines who and what we are allow that same person to be torn apart by shrapnel? How can this God allow such dreadful inhumanity? God was destroyed on the battlefields of North France for many men and women; if not destroyed severely wounded.

Yet on Christmas Day 1914 something special happened. This truce happened because of a birth, a humble simple thing, something that happens thousands of times a day all over the world. This birth that took place two thousand years before that Great War. A birth to a poor family in a cow stall. The birth of a child brought into a world of occupation and war, a brutal world full of danger and oppression.

This truce came about through a shared heritage, a shared understanding of the specialness of the day. Both sides wanted peace on a day when they and their families would normally have gathered together if the war had not intervened. For both sides this would have been a day of celebration and gathering for festival, whether at church or chapel or just at home. But in the midst of the battlefield where all else that makes us human and civilised is blasted away what those troops were left with is the hope of the Christ child, that simple story of the birth of Jesus that tells us of the humanity that should unite us.

The simplicity of the Christmas story breaks through the imperfections and fragmentation of our lives to remind us of the basic human condition from which we come. There is more to this narrative as witnessed by those others that shared in the story. As the story of Jesus' birth unfolds we are shown his divine nature, not through magical events but the witness of shepherds and Magi. Angels were said to have appeared on the hill side but it was they, the people of the narrative that came to the shed in which the child was laid. It is through them the fragile nature of God amongst us is witnessed and welcomed.

Today our world is still at war. Christians persecuted, cities bombed, people killed, children massacred. Where is God in all this? Like those soldiers in the battlefields of Ypres and Bethune we have to stop and seek Him in the humanity of our neighbour, regardless of their creed or colour or sexuality. To see God in the brokenness and variety of our humanity. We must also look to ourselves and in the light of this Christmas story ask how far we have moved away from God. Like the shepherds and the wise men we should go to the manger and seek Jesus for ourselves, renewing our relationship with him who came to bring peace on earth and good will to all people.