Christmas: Proof of God's Love for us, and Believing in humanity

At the dawn of the 20th century, many had reason for optimism for the future. There had been no major wars in Europe for nearly a century. And even were a war to break out, it was thought that this might not be such a bad thing as it would only last a matter of months.

Unfortunately, the optimism at the dawn of the century did not last long. In 1914, World War I broke out. Fighting stalled, and trenches were dug all along the Western Front. Eventually these trenches were some 600 miles long. They prevented the Germans from advancing further, but also as the troops dug in, the Allies could not advance. And so in 1914, you had a long stalemate ensue. On top of this, as the weather grew cold and wet, you had troops living in miserable conditions with more dying of disease than being killed by the enemy. Needless to say, morale was quite low. The troops had been promised this would be quick war, and that they would be home by Christmas. However that was clearly not going to happen.

The high command of both sides were posed with the challenge of keeping a fighting spirit going by helping the soldiers to understand just how awful the other side was. And so in World War I, governments engaged in propaganda the likes of which had never before been seen. Germans for instance were alleged to have bayoneted small children and attacked women, and this was why they had to be stopped. In the words of one historian, you needed a deep moral hatred of your enemy to stop him, and you could not think of him as just an opponent. You had to hate and to want to kill him.

The strategy seemed to be working as despite the stalemate, fighting was constant with each side firing over the trenches at one another. And in an effort to boost morale, the Allied High Command ordered an offensive on December 19th. However, it has the opposite effect. No ground was gained, and both sides were slaughtered in the largest numbers of the war to date. Retreating back to the trenches, morale was as low as it has ever been. Christmas was just 6 days away, and everyone knew they will not be home for Christmas.

Both sides do try to cheer up the troops, as letters and warm clothes and gifts are sent to the front lines from the public. But as it turns out, something very unexpected would do much to boost morale and it's certainly something the High Command would not approve of.

On Christmas Eve in 1914, in the fifth month of the Great War, Allied soldiers are astonished by what they see and hear. At first, they think it's some kind of trick. There are lights from the German trenches and songs being sung. "Silent Night" is heard in German, and British Private Frank Sumter recognizes this hymn and so encourages his side to sing as well, in English. And in some spots along the front, you have the same song being sung at the same time in different languages.

It was an astonishing sight, but what happened the next day was even more amazing. Emerging in No Man's Land was a German soldier. He had a tree with candles on it. Now at this point, the

Christmas Tree was not known in Europe; only Germans had the tree, and so to the Allied soldiers this tree with candles was rather strange. But it was a gesture and one by one, the British began to pop their heads out of the trench. Private Leslie Walkington who was there that day said at first they were quite scared, as you were told to kill these other people, but then really you realize that these young boys were not made to kill one another and were really just afraid of one another.

And so others that morning said "if he can do it we can do it" and on both sides, men began to emerge from the trenches. They walked into No Man's Land, and shook hands. Initially they were afraid, but after they shook hands, they realized that the other side was not what the Propaganda Machine from the government had made them out to be. A mutual consent emerged that there would be no fighting that day, and now they were shaking hands, laughing and talking.

As they spent the day over the trenches, a spirit of friendship emerged. They talked and conversed; they played soccer together. They found the hate they had been taught was unfounded, as they really were not all that different from one another. One British soldier found that his uncle and the uncle of the German worked close by one another. Another actually borrowed a German helmet and returned it to the German soldier later in the day – an incredible act of trust.

Sadly, the worse was still to come. Millions more would die before the fighting ending in 1918. And the terms of the Armistice would leave many Germans embittered and set the stage for WWII within 20 years.

We can look back on this war and see so much evil; total war for the first time; the destruction of so much life senselessly, and the dehumanization of people. This is true. But we can also look at this and see the power of hope; of the goodness in the hearts of us all.

As this year winds down and we come to Christmas this week, it perhaps feels a bit like a trench war; fighting an enemy and just waiting and waiting for progress. That is on the horizon, but it has been hard on us all. We also live in a time of such intense polarization; the passing of the election certainly has not put an end to that. We vilify the other side; we become entrenched in anger over politics, over differences. Other times our sins can be overwhelming and we can't find a way out. Or life just beats us up.

But as we hear in our Christmas readings, we are to not be afraid. The people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light. Our God is not a distant God, but is in there, in the trenches with us. Born a frail infant on a cold night; a child who would grow up and time and time again be with the sick, the poor, the sinner. A God who would forgive time and time again, and lay down His life for us all. A God who wants to have room in our hearts to bring us the peace we long for.

But He is also a God who wants us to be like that German soldier with the Christmas tree in No Man's Land. Inside humanity is the power for such good as seen on that Christmas Eve all those year's ago. So let us also be inspired to remember what a difference we can make when we refrain from fighting fire with fire; when we show patience and love; when we practice tolerance; when we reach out to those who have wronged us; when we pray for our enemies; when we see a person for their humanity first before we look at their status or their political affiliation; when we talk about our faith to people both in our home and in the larger community; when we set an example for our kids about why God and faith matter more than anything else we do; when we do acts of kindness; when we volunteer; when we love. The choice is ours.

As I've said many times by now, God does not will Covid, a World War, or any evil. It is allowed. But it is something He enters into with us, as seen every time we look at a Cross because He loves us, and wants to show us how far He goes for us all. May that love bring you peace this Christmas, and may you never forget that in a simple act of mercy, you can do so much to bring that love into the world, truly filing it with the light of Jesus.

God's blessings to you and your families and Merry Christmas,

Fr. Paul