



Christmas Eve - Biv
Excerpts From Isaiah 9, Titus 2 & Luke 2

1914

Jesus came to rescue the world from darkness, and he calls us to be part of his mission
Fr David King – 24th December 2020

You will benefit greatly from reading through the first lesson before reading this (Isaiah 9.1-7)

1. John Ferguson

I'm sure many of you have heard about the alleged football match that happened between British and German troops on Christmas Day 1914, just a few months after the first world war started. Well, during lockdown this year, I was reading a fascinating book about how, far from being the evil, violent people that we're sometimes made out to be, human beings are actually pretty kind and nice. But to my surprise and delight this book's last chapter was devoted to the subject of this Christmas Day Truce, so I'd like to share with you just a little of what *actually* happened on that day in 1914 in the trenches.

- The war, of course, started in the summer of 1914, and by Christmas more than a million soldiers were already dead, a generation of young men was being decimated. But something incredible did indeed happen that Christmas. It all started on Christmas Eve around 7 or 8pm in the evening. The British troops heard 'silent night' sung in German drifting across no-mans land; 'Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht'. The British were amazed, it was beautiful, and they responded with 'The First Noel'. The Germans applauded and before they knew it they were singing 'O Come All Ye Faithful' in Latin, together (Adestes Fideles). Two nations, singing the same carol, in a common tongue, in the midst of war.
- But then things got even more remarkable. A soldier from a Scottish Regiment heard someone calling out asking if they wanted any tobacco. He courageously stepped out into no-mans land and soon was laughing and joking with the Germans. The next day, the bravest of the soldiers cautiously climbed out of their trenches again, when they saw it was safe others followed, and soon they were flocking out. Gifts were exchanged, the British offered chocolate, tea and puddings, and the Germans offered cigars and schnapps. They joked, took photographs together, and soon a game of football was organised using helmets for goalposts. 4-1 to the British ;-)
- That evening, Christmas feasts took place up and down the front line, all of this is documented by numerous eye-witnesses – some of the soldiers could hardly believe it themselves. Most of the British were stunned at how friendly the Germans were, not like the propaganda had made them out to be at all. A full two-thirds of the front line ceased from fighting that Christmas. 100,000 soldiers laid down their arms, and if it had been up to them, the war would have ended there and then.
- It was only the leaders at the very top who resisted this movement of peace. On 29th December the German Army Command issued an order that strictly prohibited fraternising with the enemy and a British Field Marshal did the same and demanded all gestures of friendship cease immediately. That is all documented. But thousands did their best to sustain the peace. Letters were passed across the lines in secret. A French unit wrote to a German one 'Be on your guard tomorrow, a general is coming to visit our position and we shall have to fire'. A British Battalion received a

similar note from the Germans 'If we are forced to fire, we shall fire too high'. Don't tell me that God doesn't dwell in the darkest of places.

2. Isaiah

- We cannot understand what Christmas is all about unless we first understand this reading from Isaiah. Isaiah lived in Jerusalem in the 6th Century BC and it was a time of great anxiety in the city. The Assyrian army was gathering, Isaiah knew that they were coming and the whole city was going to be destroyed. Things were not looking good, they were staring death, and worse, in the face.
- But this is Isaiah we're talking about, the greatest prophet who ever lived! He is a believer, a hope-r! He knows the scriptures, he knows the ancient texts in which God had promised, in time, to free the world from all the evil, the sin, the death and decay that had mistakenly entered into it. And so, in the midst of this dire situation, Isaiah speaks a message of hope from God. He says that God will send a king soon, and that this king will usher in a new age of peace, bringing renewal to all creation. 'Wonder-Counsellor' will be his name 'Mighty-God, Prince of Peace'. He will banish evil from the world and his reign will have no end.
- But this doesn't happen, that king doesn't come. The city is destroyed...and all the citizens, those still alive, are taken off into exile. But Isaiah and his disciples still believe this will come to pass and that God will make good on his mysterious promise in time.

3. Yeshua

- 400 years later, the angel announces to the shepherds that this king has arrived "I bring you news of great joy, today in the town of David, the saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord". Could it be true? Could it be that this rescuer has finally arrived? He doesn't look like a king, born in a stable and all that. And it's a bit strange that these nobody-shepherds get to hear the news first. And yet, in the scriptures, God does have a habit of doing things in very strange ways.
- I believe with every bone in my body, that Jesus was, and is, that long awaited foretold king. He grew up and began the work of freeing creation from everything that is not right, not with great shows of power and might, but by simple acts of healing, acts of love and forgiveness. But that is not where the story ends. He gathered a few people around him and commissioned them to carry on his work and to invite others to participate in this amazing project to make God's kingdom present on earth. And here we are, 2000 years later, the followers of Jesus, his co-workers, participants in his mission to free the world from all the bad things that have taken hold of it. And we, at our very best, are exactly that! In the midst of war, we found it in ourselves to play a game of football. Isaiah spoke of this time being one when swords would be beaten into ploughshares...little did he know that actually it would be helmets beaten into goalposts.
- This year we have been overwhelmed with bad news. Humbled by a little virus. This year has been a reminder of how fragile our world is, and certainly how fragile our secure and comfy lives are. But in the midst of it, the light of human kindness has shone brightly. And that is all part of the good news we celebrate tonight, good news like no other! Firstly, that God is there, in the darkest of places. Secondly, that Jesus came to begin the work of freeing the world from evil and darkness, a work he will complete in the fullness of time because *the battle has already been won*. Thirdly, that he invites us, little us, to work alongside him to bring about this new world. What better news could we possibly ask for?

Jesus, thank you for coming to share in our lives. Help me to work with you to fill the world with goodness.