

Merry Christmas – Sermon

Light in the darkness
& great joy
an end of burdens
& oppression
disarmament
& peace
justice
& righteousness

Sisters and brothers, we sing of it – every Christmas...
We read it, we hear of it, we know the texts almost by heart...
We are so used to it – stuff of our hopes and dreams...
But what if it all comes true?

Imagine picking up the newspaper and reading this headline:
“24 Hours without Bombing in Syria”
...after months and years of fierce fighting and killing.
And we learn that this truce, this break from war, was not ordered from on high,
but initiated by the fighting troops themselves, who actually put down their
weapons and approached each other with gestures of peace.
They put their mistrust aside and shared coffee, chocolates, and cigarettes.
They looked at each other’s family photos...
They played football... right there on the desert sand.

You wouldn’t believe what you’d be reading...

Nor could people believe it a bit over a century ago when such an event did happen
in the midst of the bloodiest war ever at that time of human history: World War I.

It was in 1914 in German-occupied France.
The invading army and the Allies were literally dug in trenches, sometimes just 20
feet apart.
To raise your head above the sandbags was to risk having it blown off. The
opposing soldiers could hear one another, and if they dared to, even look into each
other’s eyes.
Separating the trenches was a small patch of earth called No Man’s Land... littered
with shells, shrapnel, and the frozen bodies of the killed.

Such is the landscape in which “Merry Christmas” takes place. Nominated for an
Oscar for the best Foreign Film, it is the true story of that Christmas cease-fire,
when men on both sides really laid down weapons and “became friends”.

It seems like the stuff of an urban legend, but it is true.

When watching the film it begins with three classrooms.
Scottish, French and German schoolboys recite poems full of hate.
They tell their classmates in rhyme form how the enemy must be wiped off the face
of the earth so their own nation could prosper.

Moving ahead ten years, we see young men hurrying off to war; some as
enthusiastic as going to a football match.

One of these men is the German Nikolaus Sprink, an opera singer whose solo at
the Berlin opera is interrupted by a German army officer who has come up on
stage to announce that war has begun.
Sprink was drafted and had to leave his singing partner and lover, the Danish Anna
Sörenson.

With a permission of the Crown Prince, Emperor Wilhelm II's son, Anna joins
Nikolaus at the front on Christmas Eve. The top militaries had decided that a
Christmas concert would cheer up the soldiers, and ordered Anna and Nikolaus to
sing.

Kaiser Wilhelm, the emperor, had also decided that it would be good to lift up the
soldiers' spirits to send Christmas trees into the trenches.

Believe it or not, a forest of pine trees with matching decorations is sent out to the
troops.

This is not a romantic film detail. It is recorded in hundreds of letters which the
soldiers sent home from the front.

On that fateful Christmas night it is the Scottish bagpipers who take a first step.
They begin to play a highly emotional Scottish folk song: "I am dreaming of
home..." The Scottish soldiers hum along... some sing with the rusty voices of
this awful war.

Remember, the troops are only 20 to 30 feet apart from the each other...

So, when the Scottish finish their song, the German soldiers in their ditches
spontaneously applaud.
Nikolaus Sprink takes a Christmas tree in full decoration and climbs up the rampart
and sings – with his most beautiful opera voice – "Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht"...

The Scottish listen to the magic of the music...
still their guns at the ready...
and...
the Scottish bagpipers join in playing "Silent Night"...

Now the Scottish applaud...

Then one of their bagpipers begins to play the first line of “O Come All Ye Faithful”... he stops for a bit...

Sprink takes a moment...

...and sings

...accompanied by the Scottish bagpipers.

(this cost me a tear or two when watching the film)

Still singing Sprink takes the Christmas tree and walks over into No Man’s Land, places the tree there and greets the Scottish soldiers, while the camera goes over to a French soldier quietly mouthing the words of the song in his ditch, tears streaming down his cheeks.

The German commander now comes to call Sprink back, but before he can do so the Scottish officer joins them at the Christmas tree.

The French commander becomes aware of what he calls “a mess going on out there” and goes into the No Man’s Land too.

It is the Scottish officer who suggests one night of peace.

The German commander agrees to it saying “No worries, it is just for one night.”

And the French officer calls a soldier to bring the three a bottle of champagne which they share in battered tin cups.

In each other’s languages they wish one another Frohe Weihnachten, Merry Christmas & Joyeux Noel.

Then...

...slowly

...the soldiers of the three armies leave their trenches

...and walk towards each other in the No Man’s Land.

They share what they have: coffee, tea, chocolates, champagne...

And then

...Anna appears.

The soldiers look at the woman

...and begin to show each other photos of wives and children.

They share each other’s stories and discover how much alike they all are.

The French officer’s home quarter in Paris happens to be the beloved holiday place of the German commander, and so on...

The soldiers make attempts speaking each other’s languages...

From a far away village church they can hear the bells ring...

The Scottish army chaplain climbs a small hill and reads a mass.

When he finishes his sermon, there is a moment of utter silence...

He looks at Anna

...nods

...and she stands up and sings the Ave Maria of her life.

The soldiers have a peace on their faces, as they may not have had since the war had begun.

The threefold Amen ends,

and there is

the most awesome silence

over the battlefield.

The Scottish minister speaks the peace, the officers wish each other Goodbye, and all return onto their sides.

By the end of the night the Christmas trees are taken down.

The Scottish army chaplain and the officer agree on a minimum of report put into the army records of that night.

The next morning the soldiers are ordered to start the shooting again, but can't.

Having seen their dead lying frozen in the No Man's Land, the officers feel the urge to meet again. Over a cup of coffee they organise the burying of their dead in dignity and one more moment of peace.

The bagpipers play while the alive bury the dead in the deep winter of 1914 there in the North of France.

A day later all three armies play football and cards in the No Man's Land.

And when they should fight with each other again, they realize that they can't.

Celebrating Christmas with each other had made enemies friends.

And once they had shared food and drink and had sung with each other, they could not make war anymore.

The bagpipers play a last time.

The film ends.

The war goes on.

A moment of humanity made history.

The soldiers and commanders get no praise for what they've done.

Their divisions are dissolved, the officers and soldiers sent to other fronts.

World War I lasted four more years.

It could have ended after Christmas 1914,

had the lesson of this Christmas been learned by the leaders of the nations as well.

The Christmas message of a true event, of a beautiful film, and of this evening is:

Christmas Eve on a World War I battlefield changed the lives of these men forever. Without an enemy, they learned, there can be no war.

No Man's Land had become God's land.

Whatever land we live in today...
let it be God's land.
Not just for one night but forever.

Let the power of the magic of Christmas live in your hearts and minds
tonight and every night.
Amen.

Let us now sing as the soldiers sang, and as all of Christianity sings today
"O Come All Ye Faithful", MH 234