

## **In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen**

The details of this beautiful and mysterious story often get forgotten upon the Christmas cards, in the Christmas carols, and in the nativity plays. In scenes so sweet and saccharine the reality of the nativity can get rather glossed over.

Neglected is the disruption of Joseph's life at the hands of the oppressive Augustus. Forgotten is the voicelessness and vulnerability of the teenage Mary.

Excluded is the inevitable exhaustion that came with making that 90 mile journey along dry river banks and over rocky mountains.

The thirst,  
the stumbling,  
the homelessness  
and the labour pains  
are rarely seen in our images of the nativity.

The details of this beautiful and mysterious story sanitized over two thousand years, where the hard rocks, and the dirty dust are replaced with serene scenes of a smooth desert. Yet, that journey to Bethlehem rather than being stylized or immaculately painted, was a rough and hard trek into an unknown future. A journey that seemed to end with in-hospitable innkeepers and the rough wood of a manger.

Yet the raw details of this beautiful and mysterious story give its depth of colour, its eternally painted pigment and its radical dimensions.

God could have chosen anywhere to make his appearance on earth.

He could have chosen the gold and red marbled corridors of the Emperors palace.

He could have chosen the warmth of a regular family.

He could have chosen somewhere clean, and tidy, and nicely presented.

But he didn't.

God chose to be born in the hardness, the rawness, the rough of our world.

He chose to be born to a labourer and a teenage girl.

He chose to take his first human breath in the damp and smell of a stable stall.

He chose to be born among the lost and the lowly.

We know from the stories of the Old Testament that God often works best with the profundity of paradox and in this particular moment of arrival, of birth, and of first wordless cry, he remained true to form. He began in the world with the humblest of beginnings. The bits we try to ignore, the bits we try to escape, the oppression and frustration and injustice of the world, are precisely where he chose to start.

Divinity was found in the dirt, made tangible in the terrible, became human in the inhumane. God chose to be in the details of our world that so many try to neglect.

Do these difficult details diminish the story?

Do these gritty dimensions ruin the Christmas cards or the neatly turned out nativity sets displayed in our windows?

No.

Because by choosing to be born there, to become personal and real in the darkness of a dusty and depressing midnight sky we are shown the greatest truth of all. That there is no part of our experience that God doesn't want to be present in, no corner that God doesn't want to love into fullness of life. There is not one single aspect of our existence that is out of bounds for God.

He arrives right there in the dust and the tiredness of our lives whether physical, mental, or spiritual. He saw all the ways in which find ourselves oppressed or struggling, and he started right there.

This is not some abstract concept, or some historical miracle to be merely remembered. He may have done it for the first time then, but the true miracle is that he has continued doing the same ever since.

We only have to think of the Christmas Truce on the bloody battlefields of World War I, the war that we have spent so much time and energy remembering this year.

Between the long parallel trenches in Flanders and France was a narrow strip called "No-Man's land." Filled with unburied corpses of soldiers killed in active duty, No-Man's Land was truly a place of human terribleness, dirty, lost, and brutal.

But by December 24 of 1914, British and German soldiers had received a number of Christmas care packages.

The German soldiers received small Christmas trees and placed them, decorated with candles, up above the trenches. Then they began to sing Christmas carols.

At first, the British troops in the opposite trenches took a few pot shots at the trees, but then they started listening to the carols and giving a round of applause after each one.

Soon the German soldiers started holding up improvised signs calling for a truce: "You no fight; we no fight." And the British units held up signs in response, "Merry Christmas!"

By Christmas morning, whole miles of No-Man's Land were filled with fraternizing soldiers from both sides - laughing, singing, exchanging gifts, addresses, and postcards, and finally being able to bury the dead.

Some soldiers who were barbers before the war offered free haircuts.

One German soldier who was a professional juggler put on a show.

Some of the units organized football matches with helmets set on the ground for goals, which according to the diary of one soldier ended with a score of 3- 2 to the Germans.

Against the orders of the senior officers, the truce lasted in some parts of the trenches until New Year's Day.

It was as if, just for Christmas, God wanted to remind the world that even in the middle of war, the most terrible scourge that sin has unleashed, God is present; even when we give up on him by sinning, he never gives up on us - his grace can make the difference. There in the midst of the gritty details of war, the light of Christ was born, and for a while there was peace, joy, and goodwill.

What then can we take from this in the present day, this present night, this particular year's Christmas?

Well, we each sit here knowing all the ways in which we are lost, the bits of our lives that we struggle with or feel terrible about, or even our worries about the state of the world – and we can believe that God has not abandoned us.

Even more than that, we can believe that God loved us so much that he came among us. Even more than that, we can believe that God continues to love us, and so he is still with us, just as he was all those years ago.

This is why we gather here this evening – to have that hope, that belief, that love, renewed in our hearts and minds, relived before us in the raw details of this beautiful and mysterious story, and brought to life once more.

Tonight and tomorrow, the love of God in Christ dwells with us, not just in the shiny, nice and happy bits, but also in the messy and gritty details.

Because from this beautiful and mysterious tale of a teenager and a labourer, we learn that God knows, fully knows, the profundity of the paradoxes in which we each dwell.

Light looked down and saw darkness.

'I will go there'

said light

Peace looked down and saw war.

'I will go there'

said peace.

Love looked down and saw hatred.

'I will go there'

said Love.

So, He,

The Lord of Light,

The Prince of Peace,

The King of Love

came down

and crept in beside us.

**Amen**