

St. Paul's Cathedral, Des Moines
Christmas Eve, 2006
Bishop Alan Scarfe

Is 9: 2-4, 6-7; Titus 2: 11-14; Luke 2: 1-20

Every household probably has its favorite Christmas movie. Back in England, I was raised on *The Bells of St Mary's* which I watched faithfully with my mother, weeping at the same place every year. Yours might be *It's a Wonderful Life* or perhaps *Miracle on 34th Street*, or one of the Santa series. Top of our list at the Scarfes, for many years, of course, is that evergreen feel good Christmas movie – *Rocky!* And this year's sequel *Rocky Balboa!* My son Dominic has a birthday on December 24th, and so we would bond at the latest Rocky movie – which always seemed to come out over Christmas. Furthermore, we would see it in between the afternoon Christmas pageant and the evening Christmas Festal Eucharist.

What was I thinking, you may say, in filling my child's mind with such violent images on such a blessed night? Now I would respond that there is nothing that strange about it at all. For we all do the same in some respects. We are all made conscious on this holy night that we do not measure up to its purity. We do our best to surround ourselves with Christmas cheer, but somewhere in the mix there may be a little violence – some sibling rivalry that comes out, or some unsettled business in relationships – something that contrasts with the message of peace and hope which tonight announces!

I would say that it is precisely the contrast that draws us here. Rocky was just a simple expression of it. This year the Denver snows have destroyed our ability to get together. Rocky must wait as will our Christmas dinner and gift sharing until Dom arrives from his snow-affected journey.

The nativity movie, however, I do want to bring to this place tonight is quite different. It goes by the name *Joyeux Noel* and is filmed in French, German and English, and available at your local Blockbusters!

It is set in the trenches of the First World War as the first Christmas comes around. Again like us and true-to-life evening peacetime, believers in Christ were lined up in each of the trenches. – German Christians on one side, French and British Christians on the other – all poised with bayonets in hand for daily combat, but very aware of the day coming upon them being Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, and how contradictory was their situation.

The Germans bolstered their troop morale by sending Christmas trees to the front line – one for every five feet along the trenches. The British soldiers had Scottish bagpipers. Without formally setting a ceasefire, the three sides sat watching each other. One of the German soldiers was a famous opera singer who had brought his soprano wife to the camp. Together they sang *Stille Nacht*. The bagpiper picked up the tune and gradually the troops joined in the singing. Struck with courage, the tenor lifted up a Christmas tree

with its lit candles and began to walk across no man's land while still singing "Silent Night." Slowly others appear until all three sides meet where they had been fighting and where the bodies of their dead still lie around. The officers decided to acknowledge a ceasefire through Christmas Day, at least to give time to recover their dead. The soldiers exchanged pictures of their families, and shared drinks where only a few hours before they were after each other's blood.

Of course, they could not fight again in the same way. They began to tip each other off when an aerial raid was to take place, and found shelter in the attacking nation's bunker. The favor was returned shortly afterward.

Equally, of course, the officers were reprimanded by their superiors for fraternizing with the enemy. And the various battalions of soldiers were broken up as individuals were sent across the front to different groups.

I often wonder how our embattled souls would be if we could emerge from our trenches and greet each other in the spirit as well as the Name of the Prince of Peace. Equally amazing is that if such should happen, there are always others who will reprimand us; who will say that life is not that simple and would find us guilty of fraternizing with the enemy.

I waded into the Marshalltown immigration raids this past week. In one e-mail the writer simply wondered why he bothered with the Episcopal Church! And asked what is not to be understood in the concept of illegal. I wrote back that it was not only our Church he should question but also the Roman Catholic, the Methodist, the Lutheran, the UCC and Disciples of Christ – for all of us judicatories spoke with a single voice on this one.

The gift of Christmas – the God who became a part of God's own creation to lift us up to heaven itself – is always offered this way, and perhaps that is why we are continually drawn to it. The divine treasure of Christ began in lowly circumstances, and the ongoing gift of the Resurrected Christ indwelling us through the Holy Spirit at baptism continues His presence as a treasure in an earthen vessel, which is you and I.

Our good intentions continue to be subject to another's judgment or suspicion. Our desire for the peace and reconciliation and new start which Jesus offers is often diverted by our own needs for control and being in charge of our own lives, and even the lives of others. But what we forget is that God knows all this and offers Himself in Christ anyhow. And so we come to this place because we hope that our darkness might perhaps have a new light shone upon it; that into the sameness of our daily existence, a glorious sighting of celestial beings might transform us; that into our stubbornness might be placed a call to come and see our Maker – and be caught up not by the glory at all but by His awesome humility.

And all along we are tempted to say:

Lord, this is no place for you among the cattle and the hay. At least we have cleaned up the place – adding greens and wreaths and incredibly gifted singing voices and meticulous liturgical choreography.

But we don't really fool ourselves – we find your humility, dear God, astonishing, and we know at the deepest place within us that it is the only way.

The alternative is to always be fighting for our place on this earth and never getting out of the trenches. It is to fight for privilege and power; it is to fight for our legalities and rights; it is to fight for our spot in the scheme of things as if we planned it all along.

You knew about all this, and refused to engage – and so here you are, dear Lord, where none of us would deign to find ourselves if we could help it. And you call us from our self-made trenches into the no man's land of your manger – to be amazed with the lowliest of men and women as to our common source of creation and loving purpose.

Some – others – even in your Name – will disperse us from fraternizing with the enemy of our own control and success; but you come to us anyway, again and again and again. And you always take up the same place – that of our common humility, that lowliest place where king and pauper come together in their basic need. And from here you lead us all forward.

Yes, every Christmas has its peculiar circumstances. Trenches and wars are on our minds. This one also includes a Denver Blizzard messing up our plans. It also includes broken relationships that are hurting and creating uncertainty and leads us into the unknown. But every Christmas includes sufficient imagery to get us back to God, our Savior, in all circumstances if we allow it. Again I hope it is why we are here.

It is where I pray we all encounter the lowly Christ as though for the first time this year. For whoever is humbled before God is exalted by God, and your day will come. Just so Jesus meets us in his abject humility – going further from the manger by embracing the degradation of the cross - only to be raised with a name above every name that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess him as Lord. To that exalted place we humbly allow him to take us all.

Rather like a soldier stripped of rank and status and yet knowing that it is because he did the only thing of honor that first Christmas Day on the front in 1914, and in that alone he is exalted and honored and walks tall with his God.

Amen.