

Back in 1914 on this night Europe was a war, a war that was to drag on for four years, to involve horrendous carnage on battlefields such as the Somme; it was to change the map of Europe, to see the end of the Austro-Hungarian and Turkish Empires, the fall of the Romanov house of Russia and the rise of communism.

But this night was different, this first Christmas of the war was marked by a cease-fire. The battlefields were quiet that night and the troops on both sides settled down to celebrate Christmas as best they could. In the quietness of the night British soldiers heard a familiar tune wafting across the no man's land that lay between the trenches. It was the sound of German soldiers singing the carol "Stille nacht, Heilige nacht" Recognising the tune, British soldiers began to join in the song, singing "Silent night, holy night."

At the end a stillness settled and then men moved out of both trenches towards each other - there followed a time of sharing, sharing of cigarettes, of food, of stories, even games of football between troops from both sides; followed only too soon by a resumption of hostilities.

For the brief period of that Christmas cease-fire of 1914 peace, harmony, fellowship broke through the darkness and hostility of all-out war. It was a foretaste of the peace and reconciliation that would come upon a Europe torn apart by war.

We have just read those lovely words with which John opened his Gospel. This passage speaks of a light shining in the darkness ; the darkness has not overcome it.

This is what we celebrate this night; the coming into the world of a light that has never, will never go out. It did not go out, even in the darkness of Calvary. Many times in human history, when evil seemed triumphant light still shone through and would shine on long after. And of course the darkness of the battlefields of Christmas 1914 transformed by a common, perhaps barely articulated, allegiance to Christ.

Bishop Leonard Wilson, who was Bishop of Birmingham when I was growing up, had been Bishop of Singapore when the city was captured in the last War. Held in appalling conditions and subjected to torture, he bore a remarkable Christian witness, at one stage travelling to Japan to be reconciled with one of his former jailers. He spoke of the most memorable communion service that he ever celebrated was conducted in a prison camp, using a few grains of rice kept back from meagre rations for bread, and rainwater collected from the hut roof for wine. The light shone in the darkness and the darkness could not overcome it.

This year has seen the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Enniskillen Remembrance Day bomb. For me one of the most remarkable memories of the troubles in Northern Ireland was the testimony of Gordon Wilson in the wake of that atrocity that had claimed the life of his own daughter, in which he spoke of the importance of forgiveness, of reconciliation. Out of the darkness of barbarism the light shone and the darkness could not overcome it.

As we celebrate Christmas this night, as we celebrate the Light of Christ coming into the world, let us also reflect on our calling as members of the Body of Christ to bear our own particular witness. Jesus taught his disciples:

"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." *Matthew 5:14-16*

The battle fields of the First World War, the inhuman cruelty of a forced labour camp, the barbarity of the Enniskillen Remembrance Day bomb were each in their own way transfigured by a witness to Christ. In each of those situations of darkness, a light shone that the darkness could never overcome. May we go out from this place to shed something of the light of Christ in the world in which we live, in our homes, in our place of work, in the communities in which we live.