

⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. *John 1:5*

In this year 2014 there have been a number of anniversaries. There has been the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War. On the eve of the outbreak of war Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary, observed to a friend, 'The lamps are going out all over Europe. We shall not see them lit again in our life time.' An all consuming darkness was indeed descending as in four years of trench war fare millions perished.

We also saw the 70 Anniversary of the D-Day landings, a turning point in a war that had seen millions perish in concentration camps that operated ethnic cleansing on a truly industrial scale, as Jews, Slavs, handicapped, homosexuals, gypsies were consumed by gas and fire.

Then in recent times we have witnessed inhuman treatment of almost medieval cruelty in West Africa and the Middle East, all in the name of Jihad, holy war. There have been Sundays when I have felt at a loss as to what prayers to offer up.

And still we read, and still I want to affirm: ' ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.' Are we whistling in the dark? Are we clutching at spiritual straws? How do we find meaning, how do we find God in the midst of all this.

When we were in Berlin a few weeks back, we visited the National Memorial for those killed in the First World War. At the centre of the memorial was the figure of a mother clasping to her breast the body of her dead son. There was a hole in the roof directly over the statue so that when the sun shone it shone on the statue, when the rain fell it fell on the statue. Even when the rain fell, the light still shone on the figure of the mother holding her dead son. I thought of those words from John's Gospel: ' ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.' I was left with a picture of a love that felt the pain of death but also a love that

transcended death.

Tonight is also the centenary of the Christmas Truce of 1914 when for a few hours the fighting. As troops rested from battle in the British trenches they heard the sound of voices from the German lines only a few hundred yards away, the sound of singing. The tune was familiar but the words were not.

‘Stille nacht, heilige nacht’. Someone in the British trenches, recognising the tune, started to sing ‘Silent night, holy night’ and an eerie peace descended on that part of the battlefield of the western front. Soldiers began to leave their lines and made their way across ‘No man’s Land’ and in that brief period of truce they shared cigarettes and chocolate, the now legendary football game, followed only too soon by a resumption of hostilities.

for the brief period of that Christmas ceasefire 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 eventually come upon a Europe torn apart by war.

And so we read those lovely words with confidence and conviction: ‘⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.’ For 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 battlefields of Christmas 1914 transformed by the shared expression of a common, perhaps barely articulated, allegiance to Christ.

Earlier this year I re-read the story of Bishop Leonard Wilson who was Bishop of Birmingham when I was growing up. He 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 one of the most

memorable communion services he ever conducted, celebrated in a prison camp, using a few grains of rice as bread and rainwater collected off the roof of the hut for wine. The light shone in the darkness and the darkness could not overcome it.

I recall when we visited the Auschwitz Concentration Camp, being shown the isolation cells where prisoners were locked up and left to starve to death. One had been occupied by Fr Maxemillian Kolbe, a Polish priest. The camp authorities, to punish a minor misdemeanour ordered a young man to be locked in one of the cells – the young man had a wife and children. Fr Kolbe stepped forward and offered himself instead. The camp commander agreed and Fr Kolbe took his place. For several days the voice of Fr Kolbe signing hymns could be heard across the camp. The light shone in the darkness 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:

¹⁴ "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵ No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. *Matthew 5:14-16*

The battlefields of the First World War, the inhuman cruelty of a forced labour camp, the barbarity of a concentration camp 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 and neighbourhoods in which we live.