

## Homily for Christmas Eve, 2020

If you were to ask people in the time of Jesus, people who lived in the Mediterranean world, the known world at the time, the Roman Empire, “Who is the Son of God, the redeemer, the saviour of the world?” Everyone would immediately answer “Caesar Augustus” and not “Jesus” as we would answer now. The emperor, in Jesus’ time, was seen as divine or at least as a demi-god, and if you were a good, law-abiding citizen of the Roman Empire, you didn’t question that. If you were to say, “Jesus is the Son of God, the redeemer, the saviour of the world,” you would either be laughed at or probably put to death for high treason. King Herod, a Jewish, puppet king, who did whatever the emperor told him to do, was given the title, “King of the Jews” long before it was ever applied to Jesus. He was not a true king and wanted to put the Child Jesus to death immediately upon hearing that a child king was born.

Getting back to the emperor, he was expected to be the bringer of peace to the empire. Like the other titles, I just mentioned, the title Prince of Peace was a way of describing the emperor before it became a way of describing Jesus. Roman peace, or what they called *Pax Romana*, was top-heavy, forced upon people, and was only a veneer. Underneath the veneer was not true peace but control, manipulation, and threats. It would be like frazzled, stressed-out parents loading up the car to begin a family vacation with a threat: “We’re all going to have fun whether you like it or not!” The kind of peace that Jesus offers the world is not a veneer; it’s real. It’s costly; it cost Jesus his life, but it is still here, while the Roman Empire is long gone and relegated to the history books.

Wars, which seem to be the very name of history, have never brought lasting peace to the world. Never. War is a means of control, not a means of seeking peace. *Pax Romana* is the world’s way of seeking control and calling it peace. *Pax Romana* calls what it has at the center peace, yet violence has merely been exported to the edges. It is no real peace. We all like to think of ourselves as peaceful people, but the truth of it is violence lives very close to the surface in all of us and usually doesn’t take much to trigger it. That is why we, individually and collectively, need to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the true Prince of Peace. He came, and he still needs to come.

Back in 1967, Martin Luther King, the great civil rights leader, while visiting a jail in California said, “There can be no justice without peace and no peace without justice.” Five years later, in 1972, the pope at the time, Pope Paul VI said something very similar. He said, “If you want peace, work for justice.” Do not simply pray for peace. Do something else; work for justice.

Christians all over the world, and this year is no exception, will put up Christmas trees, get out ornaments, and will wish their family and friends, “Peace on Earth.” But after a few weeks, the tree comes down, the ornaments are put away, and peace on earth goes back in storage for another year. Yet, a star appeared above Bethlehem 2000 years ago, a star we have not been able to get out of our minds ever since. It was a reminder then, as it is a reminder now, that you can never achieve peace on earth through victory—only through justice. Real peace cannot be packed away as easily as Christmas decorations can.

There is a true story about a truce between the German forces and the Allied forces that took place on Christmas Day 1914 in the throws of World War I, the war that was supposed to end all wars. In the brutality that war is, there was a moment of hope that was later coined as the Christmas Truce of 1914. Soldiers on both sides, the Germans and Allied troops, refused to fire upon each other. Instead, they left their trenches, laid down their arms, had a friendly soccer game, and even exchanged little gifts like food, buttons, hats and cigarettes. It started with one daring, German soldier singing Silent Night, laying down his rifle, and standing unarmed in the patch of ground between the German trenches and the Allied trenches in what they called No Man’s Land. This single soldier was naming, without words, what was in the hearts of all the soldiers, that they had no desire to kill each other.



This was a truce started from the bottom up by the soldiers and not an official ceasefire which only the commanders at the top could order. When the soldiers would not go back to killing, the commanders had every one of them replaced. Each soldier, entered No Man’s Land without ammunition and saw in the “enemy” a

fellow human being who had a family waiting for them back home and who did not believe killing would solve anything in the end. There was only one German soldier who refused to enter the truce. His name: Adolph Hitler.

For a brief time, when each soldier disarmed himself and entered No Man's Land, they were entering a space that no one dared to enter before. To enter that space, you had to be courageous, daring, and willing to be vulnerable.

By become human, God left the heavens and entered No Man's Land. We might say God was laying down the power of heaven and entering into the vulnerability of a baby. This was not *Pax Romana*, a peace forced on us from on high, like a commander who forces his soldiers to fight. No, this was peace from the bottom up, a peace, that if we would give it a chance, will last forever. If we surrender to that peace, which only Jesus can bring, we will not lose ourselves, but will find ourselves and in finding ourselves, we will find the abundant life he came to give each the world.

(Check out on YouTube the many inspiring versions of the song "Christmas in the Trenches" including John McDermott and Celtic Thunder's versions)

***Fr. Phil***