



The Rev. Alan Sutherland, Rector

December 30, 2007

Christmas 1, 2007

There is town in Lancashire, England called Warrington. During the Second World War there was a prisoner of war camp in Warrington.

Like all English towns during the years of the war Warrington was blacked out at night. The blackouts were to try and avert possible enemy air raids.

Christmas was no exception. There were no lights on trees and certainly no lights on houses.

And so on Christmas Eve as people walked to the midnight Mass no Christmas lights lit their way. It was pitch black. In the Roman Catholic Church in Warrington the church was filled by 11:30 except for the front 3 rows on either side. Promptly at 11:50 a group of German and Italian prisoners of war, flanked by armed guards, filed into church and filled the empty rows.

At 11:55 the priest appeared before the congregation and told them that the service would be without music because the parish's only organist had taken ill.

A groan mustered through the congregation.

At this point a German prisoner turned to a guard and said something. The guard spoke to the priest and the priest nodded so the prisoner went over to the organ and sat down.

Slowly and reverently he began to play in a way that brought tears to the eyes of everyone in the church.

That night, despite the darkened streets and windows, the light of Christmas lit up that town in a way that people would never forget.

That night in Warrington people, friends and enemies, saw each other as God intended them to be; one family.

That night in Warrington, the light of a great star, the spirit of Jesus, lit up the darkened countryside.

That night in Warrington the reading from Isaiah for Christmas Eve came alive for those people.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who dwelt in the land of darkness a light has shone."

In that Church in Warrington all of those people - British, Italian, and Germans - had family who were in danger. Each had been called to fight and defend the cause each was called to. Yet on that night it was the basic common humanity that God has given to all his children that transcended any cause, politics, or need for warfare.

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Established in 1847

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The world was at war, yet in that still dark night in Warrington a glimpse of the peace that could pass all understanding was seen. The light pierced the darkness and although the darkness of war lasted a few more years, the darkness never overcame it.

War ended, treaties were signed, countries rebuilt, but despite what happened in a Roman Catholic Church in Warrington, I still remember, and still know, older people in England even today, who have a deep hatred of German people.

You see it was not the darkness of the Christmas Eve night in Warrington that was penetrated by the light of Christ. It was the darkness of hatred that lives in the heart of people that was penetrated. Because it is always to the heart that God intends his light to change us.

Not only those folks in England who have a deep hatred for Germans, but all of us. Because all of us, whether we like to admit it or not, we all have blacked out our hearts to the light. We still hold very firmly, often with very good reasons, our prejudices, our hatreds, and our mistrusts.

And we hold them often with our very good reasons, against people of different color, people of different social status, sexual orientation, nationality, ethnic and cultural differences.

These hatreds and these prejudices can so often consume that it becomes toxic to our living.

Now I am not saying that there are not some bad people because I believe that there are some evil people whose goal is only to break down, to destroy and to kill. But we cannot allow the actions of a few to influence our thinking on the many.

We must always look beyond what we first see to see the child of God.
The life of Jesus is the perfect example of this.

Jesus did not see a woman or a child, a Samaritan, a Jew or a gentile. He saw a child of God. By his acceptance and his forgiveness he challenged people to a new way of living that asked those he met to see other people from the heart. To allow the light to penetrate that which is in blackout. To see a person not as some 'thing' but as some 'one'

He was also a realist that some people had no intention of changing, who wanted to enjoy a blacked out heart, and he could do nothing about that. But he did not make that an excuse for him not trying. And it should not be our excuse either.

Because if we have received him, if we believe in his name, he has given us a power that is born not of blood, not of the will of the flesh, or of the will of man, but of God. And if we are born of God then we must allow the

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light to shine in the darkness's of our heart. To remove those prejudices, mistrusts, harbored anger and hate. To see all of God's children as God's children.

We may not get any response, but in the end God will not be concerned with the response that we received, but the love that we showed.

In the end God will not be concerned as to how many hearts we changed, but the changes in our own heart.

In the end God will not be concerned about the darkness that we know is in other's hearts and how they need to change it, but the darkness in our hearts and how we allowed the light of Christ to bring light to it and begin to live our life with grace upon grace.

This is the power of Christmas and it is a power that is given to each of us.

Amen

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