

Sermons at All Saints Anglican Church of Luxembourg

Preached by Rev Geoff Read at the 2024 Carol Service

I have been preaching for Carol services for nearly forty years now

One of the first was in 1989, the year after the bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over the Scottish town of Lockerbie on 21 December 1988 in which 259 people died

And I still remember the words on a TV news programme spoken by a local resident: “No, there can be no Christmas here in Lockerbie this year ...”

They were right. To even thinking of uttering the words “happy Christmas” and doing all we usually do that follows – present, crackers, food - would be absurd

But that’s not to say there should or could be no Christmas then or indeed in any of the countless similar situations in history or own personal lives

The very shape of this evening’s service – Nine lessons and Carols - originated on Christmas Eve 1918, less than a month after the armistice that ended the First World War and as deaths continued as the Spanish Flu pandemic raged globally.

The Service was conceived by the Dean of Kings College, Cambridge, Eric Milner-White, who had recently returned from serving as an army chaplain in Belgium. Through Bible readings and music it tells the story of God’s loving and saving purposes for His world

The second carol we sang, *It came upon a midnight clear* was written in 1849 by an American pastor, Edward Hamilton Sears – those coming to Christmas services that year had still very fresh in their thoughts the end of the Mexican-American war, the painful turbulence to end slavery and also news of revolution in Europe

And even *Silent Night*, written by Frances Mohr in 1816 sits against the backdrop of the recently ended Napoleonic Wars that would have deeply affected the residents of the Austrian village where he was a young priest as they’d seen sons and husbands march away and heard news of Austria’s defeats

That same carol was sung on Christmas Eve 1914 on the Western Front – after five months of knee deep mud, a million lives lost it prompted an amazing truce between German and British forces that was hastily suppressed by senior staff on both sides

Likewise *Silent Night* was sung in the Stalingrad Kessel by German troops – you may have been in the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church in Berlin and seen the Stalingrad Madonna drawn in December 1942 by a German army doctor and Protestant pastor Kurt Reuber on the back of a captured Soviet map

Reuber was captured and died in a Soviet POW camp

In the most extreme of situations, uncertainty, seeming hopelessness there remained and remains the deep instinct to drop the “happy” but still engage with Christmas

Indeed, in the words of Kurt Reuber as he pondered what to draw that Christmas as he sat in a bunker knowing there was no way out for the encircled German forces:

I remembered the words of St John: light, life and love. What more can I add?

He continued in a letter that made it out from Stalingrad

When according to ancient custom I opened the Christmas door, the slatted door of our bunker, and the comrades went in, they stood as if entranced, devout and too moved to speak in front of the picture on the clay wall. ...The entire celebration took place under the influence of the picture, and they thoughtfully read the words: light, life, love. ...Whether commander or simple soldier, the Madonna was always an object of outward and inward contemplation.

He says: "I remembered the words of St John: light, life and love. What more can I add?"

They are words we will hear read shortly, speaking into our personal uncertainties and those that beset our moment in history

We may not have been here before.

But ordinary people like you and me have.

And their legacy is to keep telling the simple, powerful story ...

.... the simple, profound reality of Christmas – Emmanuel, God with and for us

Seen in the risky, alongside generosity of God coming among us as a baby, born into all the uncertainty of CI Palestine

Yes, to show solidarity in all that makes us feel so hopeless

But even more so, to transform it and us from the inside out