

CHRIASTMAS EVE 2023

Christmas: Something Happened – Then and Now

He was a widower and she was a widow.

They had known each other for a number of years,
being high school classmates and then having attended
class reunions in the past without fail.

This 60th anniversary of their class, the widower and the widow
made a foursome with two other singles. They had a wonderful evening,
their spirits high with the widower throwing admiring glances
across the table and the widow smiling coily back at him.

Finally, he picked up the courage and blurted out, ***“Will you marry me?”***

After about 6 seconds of careful consideration, she answered,
“Yes! Yes, I will!”

The evening ended on a happy note for the widower.

But the next morning he was troubled. Did she say yes?

Or did she say no? He couldn't remember.

Try as he would, he just could not recall.

He went over the conversation of the past evening,
but his mind was blank.

He remembered asking the question but for the life of him
he could not recall the response.

So, with fear and trepidation, he picked up the phone and called her.
First, he explained that he couldn't remember as well as he used to.

Then he reviewed the past evening. As he gained a little more courage,

he then inquired of her, ***“When I asked if you would marry me, did you say yes or did you say no?”***

“Why, you silly man, I said yes.

Yes, I will! And I meant it with all my heart”

The widower was delighted. He felt his heart skip a beat.

Then she continued, ***“And I am so glad you called because I couldn't remember who asked me!”***

Two things: First, it's good to hear laughter in church.

Laughter calls us out of our individual selves,
our individual needs and sorrows, and for the moment
makes us a community – which, when you come right down to it,
is what religion is all about.

Second, those who know me know that in those rare times
whenever I begin a sermon joke, it signals that I'm preparing you
for something quite serious.

They're quite right, although I have some reservations.

After all, this is Christmas. You're here, family and visitors are here
and you understandably want to hear from me something engaging,
a warm fuzzy for the season, a cheerful story
sending you home uplifted.

I will share the good news but, I admit,

not in a way that is necessarily “*uplifting*” or comfortable
and I apologize for that – but in a way
that I hope will lead to deeper reflection.

Anyway, so forewarned, let me lead you to a television documentary.

As some of you may already know, television’s **PBS** has, from time to time,
aired a five-part series on the holy pilgrimage shrines of all faiths
around the earth.

The series, is called “*Sacred Journeys with Bruce Feiler.*”

I saw the first in the last series and it's that episode
in which I want to briefly talk about, although it's not easy to do so.

It was devoted to the Catholic **Shrine of Lourdes** –
but it had a very special focus.

It focuses on some very special pilgrims among the 5 million
who each year make the pilgrimage to Lourdes:
70 wounded warriors from Iraq and Afghanistan.

These are soldiers with missing limbs, or who are blind, crippled,
deformed and with many demons in their heads,
whose lives and families have been upended by the horrors of war.

Half of the many soldiers in this particular group
are Christians of one denomination or another, some are believers.

Some are skeptics pretty much like ourselves in this regard.

Interestingly, uniformly, when they are asked
why they have come to Lourdes, they all say they would like to be cured

but don't expect to be, yet they all want to be healed.

Notice the wonderful difference here.

Curing refers to the body, healing refers to the soul.

Yes, these soldiers would like to be cured

but, more than that, they want to be healed.

They want their inner pain to go away.

They want those memories of their buddies dying in their arms excised.

They want that buzzing in their heads to stop.

They want their despair, their depression,

their thoughts of suicide, their feelings of being in half-human,

half-prosthetic bodies, to disappear.

The film follows a few of these wounded warrior pilgrims.

There's the 20-year-old army Rifleman, Zach Herrick,

who was shot in the face in the mountains of Afghanistan.

Once quite handsome, he lost his lower jaw and many teeth.

He says he feels uncomfortable with people staring at his deformed face.

He has trouble chewing and parking.

Then there is James Pierce from North Carolina,

who was severely and seriously injured in a suicide bombing.

There is Juan Roldan from New Jersey, who suffered

a traumatic brain injury and lost both his legs mid-thigh.

Others are paralyzed, pushed in wheelchairs by wives and girlfriends.

They each came to Lourdes free. Their expenses have been fully covered by anonymous donations from around the world as part of Lourdes' annual international military pilgrimage, which means each year 10's of thousands of soldiers gather at the place where Bernadette Soubirous, just 14, said she saw the Blessed Virgin over at the grotto in 1858.

The film shows the soldiers arriving at Lourdes as they are greeted by unstoppable love and care by ordinary people who volunteer their time to assist them in every way.

Many of these volunteers are former pilgrims themselves and have come back in gratitude to freely serve others.

These wounded soldiers are there an entire week surrounded by the love and service of these volunteers.

The soldiers take part in processions, attend mass, and finally. are dipped in the so-called miraculous waters that the Blessed Mother pointed out to Saint Bernadette.

A tense moment is when they are plunged into it's icy waters.

No one is cured.

But, strangely, everyone is healed in one way or another.

They say they feel different. Darkness of mind is lifted.

They come out with a better sense of themselves.

Then later, at the end of their stay, they all meet in the church square

where they blow off steam with singing and beer.

And the camera shows soldiers, hurt, deformed, laughing,
and, most of all – which is some kind of a miracle –
embracing other soldiers who were once their enemies,
whom they would have killed in the war.

Yet, here they are, opponents, hugging and joking with one another
quite a moving site. Some would say, it's a miraculous sight.

What unites them is the common bond of their brokenness
and some, for the first time, are able to stand up and speak to the group
and let their feelings and struggles be known.

They speak of being moved by the kindness and compassion
they feel around them at Lourdes.

Most of all, they struggle to speak of ***“something happening”*** within them,
that some of the demons inside them have subsided,
that they no longer feel worthless,
no longer feel that they'd be better off dead
or that the horrors they've seen, forever etched in their minds,
are not the last word.

They were each, deeply touched by the love, compassion,
and the attention of the volunteers.

They left Lourdes uncured but not unhealed.

They go home knowing ***“something's happened,”***
and so do their families. A powerful film. The end.

And now I want to process down to our feast,
to why we are here this Christmas Eve.

I want to return to that recurrent phrase,

“Something happened.”

I am suggesting that ***“something happened”***
is what Christmas is all about.

Something happened over 100 years ago at Lourdes.

Whatever it was Bernadette saw over 100 years ago,

“Something happened.”

Something happened to make those countless sympathetic,
unknown donors pay the fare and the upkeep for soldiers
they do not know and will never meet.

Something happened to cause those anonymous volunteers
to come and nurse, care for, and love
perfect strangers in various stages of woundedness.

Something happened to make them, once pilgrims themselves,
to feel the need to return grace for grace.

Something happened to those wounded warriors themselves who,
for the first time, found themselves looking
beyond their sorrows and injuries.

I suggest, finally, that, whatever the metaphors, the storytelling,
the ornamentation, something also happened
in Bethlehem 2000 years ago,
something more than meets the eye,
something that spiraled 2000 years later
to touch the hearts of these soldiers.

That “**something**” is that love has come to Earth,
and has found a home among us.

Christmas says that healing has been let loose in Jesus Christ
and that's why we celebrate it.

So – you may not leave here with a glow in your hearts,
but I hope at least that you leave here with gratitude in your souls;
yes, for these soldiers, of course, but especially for
the God who came among us and made something happen –
and still does. Amen