

- 1 It was Christmas Eve, 1818, in the picturesque village of Oberdorf, near Salzburg, in German-speaking Austria. The 26-year-old priest, Joseph Mohr, discovered that the church's organ was damaged - a mouse had eaten through one of the leather bellows of the organ. No music could be played.
- 2 Later that day, Joseph would be celebrating the Christmas Eve Midnight Mass - it would not be the same without any music. What could be done? Joseph could play the guitar, but he realised that the Christmas hymns they all knew, would not sound their best on a guitar. He decided to write some words as a new Christmas carol.
- 3 As he sat down, he remembered a family he had visited recently. There, with the cold winter's snow around them, he had blessed the mother and her newly-born child, and it had touched him to see how the mother protected her child from the winter's cold. This was the picture in his mind as he began to think of the Birth of Jesus, and he started to write the carol that we now know as "*Silent Night*".
- 4 With the words he had written, Joseph walked as quickly as he could through the snow to the nearby village of Arnsdorf. There he met his friend, Franz Gruber, who was the village teacher and a musician.
- 5 Joseph left the simple poem with him, and Franz set about creating a tune that would somehow match the words and the simplicity of the Gospel story. He composed a lullaby, and took it back to Father Joseph. They had little time left to practice it but, at the Midnight Christmas Mass in the Church of St Nicholas, Joseph Mohr played the guitar and sang tenor, and Franz Gruber sang bass. The church choir joined in a 4-part harmony in the simple refrain. The song touched many people and reminded them of the simplicity of Christmas.
- 6 In the months and years ahead, the organ at the church of St Nicholas continued to have problems! Repairs did not last and so, in 1824 or 1825, a repairman was called in to reconstruct the organ. As he worked, he tried out the organ by playing from sheets of music that were stored nearby. One of these was "*Silent Night*", and he asked for a copy from Franz Gruber (the organist and musician).
- 7 As the organ-repairer travelled from one church to another, he introduced many others to the delightful carol. Very soon, groups of Austrian singers added "*Silent Night*" to the collection of music that they sang throughout Europe - even travelling to the United States, where the song was translated into English. It took a few years before the carol was traced back to Joseph Mohr and Franz Gruber.
- 8 A hundred years later, the First World War started. France and Britain and Belgium opposed the invaders from the empires of Germany and Austro-Hungary. As the first Christmas of the War approached in 1914, each side had lost nearly a million men. The two sides lay in trenches that stretched about 500 miles from Switzerland to the French coastline on the North Sea. Soldiers in opposing trenches were only the width of a football pitch apart, with "*No-Man's Land*" in-between.
- 9 On Christmas Eve, in the section where the British opposed the Germans, the British gathered holly, and the Germans set up small Christmas trees which they lit up. It was an unofficial "truce". German soldiers started to sing "*Stille Nacht*", and the British joined in the carol in English: "*Silent Night*".

10 An English soldier later wrote:

"It was a beautiful, moonlit night, frost on the ground, white almost everywhere. About 7 or 8 in the evening, there was a lot of commotion in the German trenches, and there were lights. And then they sang 'Stille Nacht - Silent Night'. I shall never forget it as long as I live. It was one of the highlights of my life."

11 Let us pray:

**In silence, Lord,
I place myself amongst all those
in many parts of the world
and in various circumstances
who are praying for peace
on this day,
as I, too, pray for peace.**

12 The soldiers shook hands with their enemies, exchanged small gifts, and even played football!

 *The lengthy reading about 'Silent Night' could be shortened by omitting paragraphs 6 & 7 (the organ repair and the spread of the carol). Alternatives would be to stop at the end of paragraph 5 (before mention of the organ-repair) or at the end of paragraph 7 (before mention of the First World War).*

 *30 years after writing the words, Fr Joseph Mohr died in poverty during the winter of 1848 in the nearby village of Wagram. He had contracted pneumonia after a lengthy walk to visit a sick parishioner. Nowadays on Christmas Eve every year a choir sings "Stille Nacht" at his graveside.*

 *The term "All quiet on the Western Front" originates from the time of this unofficial truce. Some of the British officers who had taken part, were later court-martialled. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (the writer of 'Sherlock Holmes'), in his history of 1914, wrote that the unofficial truce in the First World War was "one human episode amid all the atrocities which have stained the memory of war."*

 *The English soldier quoted was Albert Moren, a Private in the 2nd Queen's Regiment, then stationed at the front line, close to the village of Armentières, near Lille.*

 *A month after the Armistice that ended the First World War (see 11 Nov), Christmas Eve in 1918 saw a new Service being held in the Chapel of King's College, Cambridge. It was the "Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols" which has since become very popular, and is always broadcast on the radio on the afternoon of Christmas Eve.*

 *Could use the prayer 'Christmas Eve' from 'Pause for Thought with Frank Topping', pg 223 (ISBN: 0-7188-2524-1).*

 *"Wassailing" used to take place in parts of England on Christmas Eve and on 6th January. After singing, a group would be offered food and drink, and would toast the health of all present. The word "wassail" comes from Old English meaning "be in health; be whole". The term "good health" is still used in toasting others with a drink. The words "whole" and "holy" come from the same stem.*



 *"Stille Nacht" is pronounced "steel-a nakt". "Bass" in the last-but-one sentence in paragraph 5 is pronounced "base".*

 Silent night

This is an excerpt from the page of this date in
'Praying Each Day of the Year',
a 3-volume book
by Nicholas Hutchinson, FSC.

For details:

<http://www.matthew-james.co.uk/>

Could make use of a search engine
to research this topic further.

This material is part of
the prayer and education website
of the De La Salle Brothers
in Great Britain:

www.prayingeachday.org