A man named Adalbert Stifter (1806-1868) was one of the greatest story-tellers of the nineteenth century. Although he was born in what is now the Czech Republic, he studied at the University of Vienna and wrote in German. He would be considered part of the period known as Realism in European literature. He was also a poet and a painter and his prose writing reads like fine poetry. He was known for his scrupulous attention to detail and he was excellent at describing natural scenery and beauty of all kinds. He is hardly known to the English-speaking world, although his novels have been translated.

One of his little novels is called “Rock Crystal.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), the Lutheran Pastor executed by the Nazis in 1945, considered this work one of the greatest in modern literature. “Rock Crystal” is set in the Austrian Alps and is a Christmas story about a family living in the picturesque little Catholic village called Gschaid. There a cobbler (or shoemaker) once fell in love with a beautiful young woman from another town in the neighboring valley across the mountains. He wooed her and wooed her and finally won her heart and the couple settled down in Gschaid. They had two children and were very happy, but the wife as well as the children had always been considered outsiders by the townspeople and they made this clear in ways subtle and not so subtle. In that part of the world, everyone was Catholic in all the villages and one of the most anticipated celebrations was, of course, Christmas.

The family would visit the wife’s parents on occasion across the mountains. As the “Holy Night” (as Christmas was called there) approached, the cobbler and his wife gave permission to their two kids to go by themselves on Christmas Eve day to visit their grandparents in that neighboring village by themselves. At this point, they were considered old enough to go without adults. So the boy named Conrad who was about twelve years old and his little sister Sanna set off on their journey. They were very familiar with the route across the mountains because they had made it many times with their parents. They arrived safely in their grandparents’ village and had a wonderful visit. Then, loaded down with gifts and goodies, the kids departed for Gschaid in the afternoon with enough time to get home before dark.
However, it began to snow heavily as they ascended the mountain. They were thus unable to follow the trail and became lost. They ended up on top of the mountain on a glacier and took shelter in a natural ice cave. Here they knew instinctively that they should not fall asleep or they would freeze to death. To stay awake, they drank some black coffee extract from grandma’s gifts and they were excited by a light show something like the northern lights. Thus they were saved by a combination of earthly gifts from loving family and by the heavenly gifts of God’s creation. The author beautifully writes of Conrad’s courage and ingenuity as well as his tenderness to his little sister. In the morning, they set off to find the trail again. Meanwhile, the townspeople had set in motion a search for the children. Everyone in the village took part in some way. When the children were found, there was great rejoicing and all went to Christmas Mass which the priest had postponed until the lost were found.

From that day on, the residents of Gschaid treated the children and their mother like one of their own.

In tonight’s beautiful Gospel from Luke, [In the story of Christmas], we hear that Mary and Joseph had to travel from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea to be counted in the census. Later the Holy Family has to escape into Egypt where they are immigrants until the danger from King Herod, who sought to kill the Christ child, had passed. When Jesus grew up and began his public ministry, he chose to spend most of his time in Galilee which was a crossroads where many different cultures and religions mingled – instead of retreating to Judea which was considerably more of a Jewish enclave. He also spent time preaching in Samaria and crossed many other borders to minister to Gentiles.

Christmas closes the gap between God and humanity in the God-Man Jesus Christ. In doing so, the mystery of the Nativity challenges all Christians and all human beings as well to reach across national and cultural and racial and ethnic boundaries to achieve unity. If the gap between heaven and earth can be obliterated and sanctity be offered to all peoples, which is the gift of Christmas, then any gap can be narrowed or eliminated – the gap between the rich and the poor in our country and in the world, the tension between the races in America and elsewhere which still tragically simmers, the gap between immigrants and those whose families have been around a while, the distance between children and adults with special needs and the rest of us, the misunderstanding about religion which has resulted in sectarian violence in so many parts of our globe. Pope Francis insistently calls us to reach out across all the gaping chasms which are the fruit of sin.
Christmas without borders is the challenge of discipleship throughout the ages. Think about how absurd it was in the story called “Rock Crystal” that a Mom and her kids should be looked down upon because the woman came from a nearby village which was virtually identical in customs and religion to the town of her husband. In our day, the geographical picture is bigger because of modern travel and communication. But it is still absurd that people hate and mistrust each other for any reason. We are all human and Christ came for everyone without exception. Without being naïve about how hard and even dangerous it could be to reach out to those whose hearts are set on violence, it is nevertheless especially important that we followers of Christ not be petty in our relationships with our relatives and with our neighbors near and far. Each person and each family who believes in Christmas is called by grace to reach across as many boundaries as they can, especially to fraternize with the poor and the forgotten. The village of Gschaid in Adelbert Stifter’s story found itself by responding in common to two lost children. Home truly became home for every single resident through that experience of being lost. Jesus came into the world to rescue all the lost – which is really everyone. We humans are all in the same boat of sin and alienation from God and neighbor.

Exactly one hundred years ago this sacred night, something almost miraculous happened along the front where German soldiers on one side and English and French men on the other were engaged in trench warfare. Pope Benedict XV (not XVI) became pope on September 3, 1914, right after the beginning a few weeks earlier of World War I. As Christmas approached, he called for a truce to mark the birth of the Prince of Peace. After all, he said, most on both sides of the conflict were Christian and culturally very similar. The generals of both armies adamantly refused. But on Christmas Eve a century ago tonight, the ordinary troops took matters in their own hands and for several hours the enemies came out of the foxholes and ate and drank together and played a lot of soccer. A young Englishman wrote home “how strange it all was” – meaning the truce. But from the human and especially the Christian perspective, what was strange was not the truce but the stupid war itself. It is not strange for human beings and Christians to get along. It is strange that we hate and distrust and kill each other.

Today it would be unthinkable for the Germans and the French to go to war. They have realized after centuries of conflict that they are one people – along with many other nations in the European Union. This unity is a fruit of Christmas. May the mystery and beauty of the Nativity lead to more such unions until, like the villagers of Gschaid, we are all “home.” Heaven, our final and true home, is a place where
everyone is good to everyone else. Let us every day, in so far as possible, make a little heaven on earth – the earth to which God came to us in the tiny Christ Child, a gift we did not deserve but a gift that by divine mercy is ours to cherish and to share.