

## Column

In December, we hear a lot about the ‘Christmas spirit’. Pinning down exactly what that is and what it looks like on the ground is hard to do. For some, it entails frenzied spending (often with money they don’t have), decorating the house, going to light shows and attending parties.

For others, this spirit manifests itself in gentler, kindlier ways. For example, extra attention is given to the poor, the lonely and the elderly; financial donations are made to charities; concerts and religious services are attended and family and friends gather . . . all good things.

Despite the excesses associated with this season, our world would be a darker and more sinister place without a yearly remembrance of Christ’s birth. Many unexpected acts of goodness and kindness have flowed from it. One, which in recent years has become widely known, is the Christmas truce of 1914. Hunkered down in trenches filled with mud and filth and separated only by a small expanse of no-man’s land, British and German soldiers laid aside their weapons, sang carols, exchanged trinkets, and played games.

A story not as widely known but equally moving involves a much smaller truce that occurred in 1944 during the Second World War. The story goes like this:

A 12-year-old German boy had moved with his mother to a small cottage in the Huertgen forest after their home in town had been partially destroyed. Fritz Vincken was his name.

Fritz’s mother hoped her husband who had stayed in town would be able to join the family for Christmas. This did not happen, even so, a knock came at the door on Christmas Eve. When Fritz and his mother opened it, they found three American soldiers, one severely wounded. These men had been separated from their battalion and had been wandering the in the forest for three days.

Even though they were the ‘enemy’, Mrs. Vincken seeing that they were little more than boys, invited them in and put the wounded soldier in Fritz’s bed. She then set about to cook the chicken and potatoes she had reserved for the meal she had intended to prepare for her husband.

Before she was finished, another knock came at the door. This time there were four German soldiers standing outside in the snow. Like their American

counterparts, they had been separated from their unit and were exhausted and hungry. She said they were very welcomed to come in but that she had three other guests they would not like. When told they were Americans, they bristled and reached for their rifles.

Firmly, she took charge of the situation. It was Christmas Eve, she said, and there would be no killing. Reluctantly, the Germans stacked their arms by the door, and the Americans turned over their weapons to Fritz's mother who put them in the same place. The entire group then sat together as Mrs. Vincken continued her meal preparation.

Much later, after the war, Fritz would tell the story of that evening:

“Relaxation was now beginning to replace suspicion. Even to me, all the soldiers looked very young as we sat there together. Heinz and Willi, both from Cologne, were 16. The German corporal, at 23, was the oldest of them all. From his food bag he drew out a bottle of red wine, and Heinz managed to find a loaf of rye bread. Mother cut that in small pieces to be served with the dinner; half the wine, however, she put away, ‘for the wounded boy.’ Then Mother said grace. I noticed that there were tears in her eyes as she said the old, familiar words, ‘Be our guest’.

“And as I looked around the table, I saw tears, too, in the eyes of the battle-weary soldiers, boys again, some from America, some from Germany, all far from home. Just before midnight, Mother went to the doorstep and asked us to join her to look up at the Star of Bethlehem. We all stood beside her except Harry, who was sleeping. For all of us during the moment of silence, looking at the brightest star in the heavens, the war was a distant, almost-forgotten thing.”

The next morning the men shook hands and returned to their respective regiments and to their mandated business of killing. Even so, who can doubt that Christ was indeed at the table that night and that each left a changed man?

If that is what you mean by the Christmas spirit, then count me in.

*ALMIGHTY God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the quick and dead, we may*

*rise to the life immortal, through him who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, now and ever. Amen. (Advent collect, Book of Common Prayer)*

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