

A FAREWELL TO CHRISTMAS

*“Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes—
Some have got broken—and carrying them up to the attic.
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,
And the children got ready for school. There are enough
Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week—
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,
Stayed up so late, attempted—quite unsuccessfully—
To love all of our relatives, and in general
Grossly overestimated our powers. Once again
As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable
Possibility, once again we have sent Him away,
Begging though to remain His disobedient servant,
The promising child who cannot keep His word for long.
The Christmas Feast is already a fading memory,
And already the mind begins to be vaguely aware
Of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought
Of Lent and Good Friday which cannot, after all, now
Be very far off.”*

*W. H. AUDEN (an excerpt from *For The Time Being:
A Christmas Oratorio*)*

This is part of a wonderful poem by one of the greatest British poets of the past century. If you read it carefully, he sums up both the emotional and spiritual senses of what these days after the Christmas holidays feel like for many people.

In the first part of the poem, he speaks of the way we pack up Christmas each year. The ornaments are put away and the lights are taken down. The tree is discarded, if it is real, or dismantled, if it is artificial. We place in boxes or crates all the Christmas decorations and life returns to normal.

I imagine it is that way every year, including this one. Christmas can provide a time of distraction and celebration, but eventually we return to our daily lives. This year, in particular, the challenges and problems that we face are unimaginable.

As a pastor I am very aware of the tug of emotions Christmas brings. It certainly can be a season of joy for many individuals but it also can be painful for others. I must admit, however, that I do not attend to the feelings the end of the Christmas season brings. Some are ready to go back to work or school. Still others feel sad as the decorations are put away. This leads me to the second idea upon which Auden contemplates. His reflection should give us pause.

The second half of the poem comments on Christ as the important aspect of the season. Auden seems to be unsure if it is ourselves who are failing Christ, "*Possibility, once again we have sent Him away,*" or He that is failing us, "*The promising child who cannot keep His word for long.*" Either way, the end of Christmas reminds us that once again, the promise of peace, of joy, and of light seems to be an illusion.

One of our challenges as Christians is to keep Christ alive every day in our hearts. Sadly, too many prefer the childhood faith that demands nothing. The one whose birth we celebrate brings us a reminder that a relationship with Jesus Christ brings great joy and peace. In Jesus Christ, our lives are to be remade. These truths cannot be put away like the boxes of baubles and lights.

Auden concludes by making the leap into Lent, with its penitential and somber character. I must confess that in those seasons when Easter comes early, Lent seems to rush upon us. For Auden, Christ is both freeing and demanding. Change requires work and change is also to be celebrated.

May Christ remain in our hearts!