

Christmastide

December 25, 2007

Though the liturgical calendar reminds us that it is Christmastide, a lovely 12-day season extending to Epiphany in January, you cannot live in this culture without experiencing how the air is let out of the holiday balloon on December 26. The Magi may not arrive in Bethlehem until January 6, but the culture abruptly drops the whole matter practically before Christmas Day is over.

I like the way W. H. Auden describes this moment in *For the Time Being*: “Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree. . . . Once again as in previous years we have seen the actual vision and failed / To do more than entertain it as an agreeable / Possibility.”

Almost anybody can be touched emotionally by the birth of a baby. But the church knows and remembers that the baby grew up and became a man who taught a revolutionary ethic of unconditional love and practical forgiveness and who overturned cultural convention by welcoming the marginalized and excluded. The church remembers that the baby grew up and got into trouble with the authorities for living out his notion of what God’s kingdom looks like—a new social arrangement without all the old barriers and boundaries, an arrangement in which all are loved and welcomed at the banquet table. The church remembers that the baby grew up and challenged social convention by forgiving enemies, turning the other cheek, responding to violence not with violence but with love.

The church also remembers a part of the story in which the culture has no interest at all—that the shadow of a cross falls over the nativity scene.

The birth is a sign, for people of faith, that God is alive and at work in the world. Christ comes again, is born again, when lives are transformed by his love, when forgiven and restored men and women begin to live new lives in a world that is suddenly new because he was born into it. The culture may drop Christmas like a hot potato, but for faith it is a beginning, not an end.

A remarkable thing happened this year in the weeks before Christmas. A letter was written to Christian leaders by 138 Muslim clerics and scholars representing every

branch of Islam. "A Common Word Between Us" stated that the peace of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians, and that love for God and neighbor is a central tenet of both religions and common ground on which we stand. "Our eternal souls are at stake," the Islamic leaders wrote.

Yale Divinity School's Center for Faith and Culture put together a response that was published in the *New York Times* on November 18, expressing gratitude for the letter, asking forgiveness for historical Christian hostility toward Islam and promising dialogue with Islamic and Jewish leaders that "seeks the good of the other" and that asks how God "would have us fulfill the requirement that we love God and one another."

So there is Christmas work ahead of us. Peace work. As Auden wrote: "Music and sudden light / Have interrupted our routine tonight / And swept the filth of habit from our hearts. / O here and now the endless journey starts."