

Different people (families) have different traditions. Some dismantle the decorations of Christmas before the onset of the New Year, others wait until sometime in the new year, and there is a church tradition of Christmas ending on the twelfth night, which I think falls on 7th January, 2018.

*Dismantling Christmas* (what else can we call it?) leaves me with two distinct emotions: first I feel that Christmas can be switched on and switched off. Celebrations cease. Guests go home. Decorations come down, some go into the loft, others into the trash.

The second more powerful, positive emotion which sweeps over me, is to reclaim our home to normal life, with a little less fanfare.

I have always thought, I was a “grinch” who was a Christmas spoil-sport, until two days ago I read a poem by W.H. Auden (schooled at Christchurch College, Oxford) describes too well, the let-down of Christmas:

Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree, Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes...

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...

The Christmas Feast is already a fading memory, And already the mind begins to be vaguely aware Of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension...<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> W.H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, 1991), 399.

Writing in 1942, Auden's sense of the dismal reality of life after Christmas was likely heightened by the uncertainties of war and the certainty of violence. Perhaps also, the poem reflected Auden's own struggles, of stepping down from the heights of merry-making, and return to dimmer realities of daily life, its monotony, despairing headlines, another year of wearisome failures, blind spots, and missteps.

The poem and the meditation in which it was set<sup>2</sup>, set me reflecting on the thought, *Is Christmas really a switch-on-switch-off event?* Do we approach Christmas with a **to-do** list and work fervently until all the lines on the list have been scored, or all boxes ticked, or should we make time to reflect on what exactly happened a little more than 2,000 years ago.

Auden's poem offers depressing poetry. Seeing Christmas as the switching on and off of bright coloured lights, of feasting and drinking, of attempting quite unsuccessfully, to love all of our relatives, is indeed depressing - its all about what we **try to do** and **want to do**, but cannot; The focus of Auden's Christmas is contained to what happens in the cities and towns around the world; it is depressing because it reminds us of human failure and our inability and weakness to do anything.

By focussing on stepping down from the heights of Christmas to walk in a broken world with all its demands on time and resources, we miss the point - **it is God who steps down from Heaven into the brokenness of this world**, with all its aches and pains and human suffering, to walk alongside us, through the unlit areas of our lives, to journey with us into the dark places in this world where **hope** is a four-letter word, often uttered with contempt.

In his Christmas Oratio, Auden lights a glimmer of hope:

*To those who have seen the Child,  
however dimly, however incredulously,  
The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all.*

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<sup>2</sup> Jill Carattini, Managing Editor of *A Slice of Infinity* at Ravi Zacharias International Ministries in Atlanta, Georgia, writing on 29 December, 2017.

He ends the Oratio with the words,

*In the meantime, There are bills to be paid, machines to keep in repair, Irregular verbs to learn, the Time Being to redeem From insignificance. The happy morning is over, The night of agony still to come; the time is noon: When the Spirit must practice his scales of rejoicing Without even a hostile audience, and the Soul endure A silence that is neither for nor against her faith That God's Will will be done, That, in spite of her prayers, God will cheat no one, not even the world of its triumph.*

We end the Christmas season with the same thought as we started: remember when the Angel Gabriel came to Zechariah the priest whilst he was serving in the inner sanctuary of the Temple, and said, *Your prayer has been **heard** (not answered!) ... you and your wife Elisabeth will have a child who will bring you and others around you great joy ...He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb (which explains the baby's reaction - jumped and kicked - in his mother's womb when Mary arrived in their home!)* ending with, *to make ready for the Lord, a people prepared.*

2018 is the year in which **our prayer has been heard (and is being answered)**, and it is also the year, the time, the season of church life, when we need to become **a people prepared**, ready for what God has in plan for us.

Let's remind ourselves, the investment we made into the planning cycle which resulted in our planning application being approved, God not only received our trust and our faith, He was pleased for the vision of the future we had considered, and decided to bless us with a facility worth several millions!

Unlike most churches I know, we will have this facility with **ZERO debt**.

It has taken a long time - our planning application was submitted in September 2007 and was approved in November 2010 after a first refusal in late 2009, but we started talking about this project in 2003!

We can tell ourselves, such projects take a long time; but we would do better to remind ourselves, it has been accomplished **by** God (despite all the objections), and **in** God's time.

God spoke to the prophet Isaiah and reminded him: ***My word which goes forth from My mouth, will not return to Me empty, Without accomplishing what I desire, And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it***<sup>3</sup>.

God is not a fortuneteller, nor does He have a crystal ball. God planned for us a world, as human beings, as a nation and a Church, and for us individually. Praying for ourselves as individuals, we tend to ignore God plan for others, His church and the world.

So, as we step into 2018, let us take God at His word. The Psalmist says: ***"The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations"***<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 55:11

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 33:10–11

## Why God's Sovereignty Matters: Seven Exhortations<sup>5</sup>

- 1 So let us stand in awe of the sovereign authority and freedom and wisdom and power of God.
- 2 And let us never trifle with life as though it were a small or light affair.
- 3 Let us marvel at our own salvation — that God bought it and wrought it with sovereign power, and we are not our own.
- 4 Let us groan over the God-belittling man-centeredness of our culture and much of the church.
- 5 Let us be bold at the throne of grace knowing that our prayers for the most difficult things can be answered. Nothing is too hard for God.
- 6 Let us rejoice that our evangelism will not be in vain because there is no sinner so hard that the sovereign grace of God cannot break through.
- 7 Let us be thrilled and calm in these days of great upheaval because victory belongs to God, and no purposes that he wills to accomplish can be stopped.

(included in the order of service for 31 December, 2017)

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<sup>5</sup> Taken from a message on "[\*The Sovereignty of God\*](#)" by John Piper (3 November, 2012). Pastor John is Chancellor of Bethlehem College & Seminary and for 33 years, he served as pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota. He is author of more than 50 books, including *Reading the Bible Supernaturally*.