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Cards for Christmas

IT is usual at Christmas to send out cards on which are inscribed greetings and good wishes. A few people make their own cards, putting into them careful work which is acknowledged a little shamefacedly by recipients who can send nothing of equal value in return. The general practice has become stereotyped, so that it is difficult to find cards which meet our individual requirements. If there is an attractive design or decoration, we may be fairly certain that the greetings are framed in words we would not use ourselves; and if the words are unpretentious, the setting is likely to be crude or artificial. Most horrible of all, to the plain-minded person, is the printing of third-rate verse on cards which otherwise are suitable. The truth seems to be that when greetings are mass produced they are aimed at the largest number of buyers, and these are thought to be people who find no incongruity in snow-covered landscapes, bells and mistletoe for a New Zealand Christmas.

When the season is at its height, however, the infection is not to be resisted. Cards are substitutes for the greetings we exchange in those last days before a holiday stillness comes over the cities. We know quite well that, when we wish our friends a happiness which is to flow from Christmas into the coming year, we are asking for the impossible. A year's happiness, if distilled in time, would be small enough in the most fortunate life. There are glowing hours, and sometimes we may have weeks of blessed calm; but happiness is like fine weather: it comes from a balance in nature which is changing and dissolving even as we enjoy it. The happy man is most likely to be busy about some task he finds useful and congenial, and in his private life he will be thinking more of others than of himself. Yet we long for happiness, even as in our collective life we ask that there shall be "on earth peace, good will towards men"—the traditional hope we know to be an aspiration rather than a wish which can have lasting fulfilment.

Nevertheless, it may be a little unfair, or even perverse, to question the taste of Christmas cards. If we cannot take the trouble to write down our own thoughts, either in letters or on cards, we must not expect commercial printers to do more than provide a rough substitute. It may still be asked, of course, why we should continue to follow a custom if we follow it half-heartedly. Many of us would have to confess that we forget to buy cards until we are reminded of them by the growing volume of Christmas mail. We then have to rush to the nearest shop and buy what we can, long after the cream has been skimmed from the market. The task comes upon us when we are busily winding up the year's work: we feel a little irritable, and are inclined to wish that the sending and receiving of cards would cease to be a Christmas custom.

It is a wise and necessary impulse which makes us pause at this time of the year and look beyond ourselves at other people and at the world before we turn aside to private joys. The ideals of mankind are not false because they cannot be attained. Hope disappears, not when ideals are shown to be beyond our reach, but when we decide that they are superfluous or unrealistic. We can renew our strength when once a year we turn away from the effort and enter a quieter rhythm in which the climate itself sometimes concurs. Perhaps we mean no more than that when we send out our cards with Christmas greetings. And in this country, where the beaches and green places are already intruding upon our thoughts, it is a wish that can be fulfilled.

N.Z. LISTENER, DECEMBER 21, 1951.