

Blue Christmas**Psalm 42:1-6a**

It's the most wonderful time of the year. Only it's not. Not for everyone.

Not when there is an empty chair at the table. Not when your body is ravaged with illness. Not when depression is too much to bear. Not without her voice joining yours on the Christmas carols. Not when you feel all alone even in a crowd. Not when you are not sure you can even afford the rent or the mortgage, let alone the presents. Not when they are trying their best to get the best of you. Not when another Christmas party means he will come home drunk again.

For many different reasons, and for many different people, it is not the best time of the year. And trying to smile and say 'Merry Christmas' is more than difficult. It's pretty near impossible.

C S Lewis once wrote: "No one ever told me that grief felt so much like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the same yawning..."

With news bulletins telling us daily of deaths, of violence, of cruelty, of war, of the ecological damage that humanity is doing to the world – it is hard for many people to be happy at this time of the year and mean it.

In truth it has never been the most wonderful time of the year. Certainly not in the days surrounding the first Christmas. The story of Jesus' birth is not to be told with a jolly voice and a ho-ho-ho. It's the story of a teenage girl, pregnant with a child that is not her husband's. It is the story of a child born in a dirty animal stall. It is the story of a family of refugees who had to flee their homeland so that their child would not be killed. It is the story of one sent into the world in peace who was condemned to death. It is the story of a light sent to shine in the darkness,

which the world snuggled out. It is the story of God's never-ending mercy which was rejected. We cannot come to the manger without acknowledging that it lies in the shadow of the cross.

And yet, if we remember the real story:

Mary was alone and afraid, but God remained with her and lifted her up among women.

Joseph was disgraced, but God revealed in that disgrace a plan to save the world.

The world was in darkness, but God sent the light of life to shine.

We are not alone, for in Jesus Immanuel, God is with us.

The people rejected God, but God still embraces us. In that sense of longing, and wondering, and arguing, and waiting, and hurting God is still there.

At this time of year, it is all right to have heavy spirits and shattered dreams. Broken hearts and deep wounds. Because of God. He comes:

To comfort you.

To redeem you.

To save you.

To strengthen you.

To restore you.

To grant you peace.

To wipe away your tears.

To give you Jesus.

Matthew 11:28-30

God's promise is eternal. God never forgets. There is always a presence in every generation that tells us that it is good to hold to the memories of the past generations because they have seen God's promise among them. This is why we keep reading these ancient Bible stories. This line of memories connects us. Each follower we have known, and those many we have not, are all part of the story of God in the world.

So tonight we remember, with sadness, but in hopefulness. And tonight we are faced again by the relentless love of God, which listens without embarrassment and without checking the time; which waits for us to finish our story, or, when the words simply will not or cannot come, places a hand on our shoulder, or enfolds us in a silent embrace. Tonight we can come to God with our burdens and our struggles, and God will offer, somehow, help. Even if it is simply through reassuring us that God listens still, and that that changes something within us.

When the stars seem older, and the nights longer, the cold deeper and the colours bluer, then this season comes to a head. And at the night's longest point we listen out for the breaking in of the light, strengthening as it pulls back the darkness. Revealing that God remembers His promise, and will accompany us through time.

Tonight, in this sanctuary, this safe place of beginnings and endings, of laughter and tears, of despair and hope, remember the Lord is coming, and know that He remembers You.

Amen

(Adapted from Spill the Beans Blue Christmas service)