

Blue Christmas

Psalm 22:1-5, 9-11

My friend Jane died a few days ago. The cancer that had nearly claimed her life many years ago returned quickly and unexpectedly and she died, still looking great, in her husband's arms. Her funeral is on Wednesday this week. With her husband, Jane ran a kennels in Fife, and I got to know her when they used to look after my dog, Luke. Being good Christians, they never charged me. You can see why they became good friends!

A death and funeral and Christmas time is hard in many ways. But then again a death at any time in the year makes Christmas, and birthdays and anniversaries hard. A world all bright and cheery, but the person living with loss often finds it hard to join in, and lives anxiously for fear of 'spoiling things' for others, through tears, or silence, or not quite getting into the spirit of things.

My friend Jane, who had been ill before, also suffered from stress. Faith helped her, though she was always honest enough to express her doubts. Faith helped, but it didn't always come easily when life was hard. Jane took up painting, and as she painted she prayed. She found the action and the concentration took her out of herself. She painted little cottages in the islands of Scotland. They spoke to her of her love for the land, and for the little white houses that spoke to her of home, and warmth, and acceptance, and helped her settle her mind and heart when she was very unsettled and felt she ought to be on the move all the time. It took her a long time to be still and to be in the one place. Painting, and prayer, helped her.

The Psalm we heard speaks about real loss, real pain, real desolation, real isolation. These are the words Jesus spoke on the cross. They resonate for some at Christmas. And yet, the word 'yet' appears. At a Blue Christmas service, here is the place to bring our pain, our loss, our fear, our guilt, our frustration. But also hear the word 'yet'. Not disregarding our feelings, but acknowledging them; not telling us to pull ourselves together, but accepting us in our fragile state. Yet, not leaving us along in our sadness. God understands, and stays by us, and says it

is all right to feel the way we feel, and yet gently says things will begin, when we are ready, to settle, reshape, and shine again.

Light in the Darkness

Matthew 11:28-30

Christmas can be difficult for different reasons for different people. For some it will be because of a recent, or a long-ago bereavement that still casts a shadow. For some it will be the lack of enough money to do even the basics of what they would like to do. Some will not know whether or not they will have work for much longer. Others fear the loss of identity that comes with retirement. Others will have no food. Others will have no home. Others will be all alone and want company. Others will be surrounded by too much noise and bustle and crave peace.

The point of this service is, in a degree of company, we find a little stillness to bring our feelings to mind. For people of faith, and for people of struggling or no faith, it is an opportunity to bring the emptiness, or the brokenness, or the burden, and know that, at the very least, you are not alone.

What faith offers, not forcibly but gently, is the invitation to lay that burden down, even if only for a moment. The invitation Jesus extends is “Come to me...rest...” This little service, with the lights, offers rest. Nothing may be changed, but perspective and breathing space is offered. The hard things will need to be faced, addressed, lived through, overcome. The love Jesus offers isn't escapism or spiritual anaesthetic. But it bolsters. There are still burdens to be borne; there are still dilemmas needing resolved; but we are not alone.

One of the essential promises of Christmas to each one of us is in one of the names given to Jesus: Emmanuel. God with us. God with us means light in the darkness, burdens shared, hope offered. No easy solutions; no pain-free answers, but the promise – hope after despair, peace after trouble, stability after chaos, and in the midst of darkness, light. Christ's light.

Amen