

The Christmas Blues

At church one Sunday in November I was handed a flyer, an invitation to an Advent 'remembering service' for the families of children who have died. I returned to the person who had handed me the flyer and asked what it was all about.

'Christmas evokes sadness in people who have lost a child,' the woman explained. 'This service is a way of acknowledging our sadness and praying for our families. We hold it at the start of December because it gives us time to grieve for our child; then we are free to enter into the Christmas celebrations with our living children. Last year it was held in the Catholic church and we lit a candle for each child who had died. This year it is being held in the local Anglican church.'

This story reminds us that sadness and loss are as much part of the Christmas experience as joyful celebration. Human suffering does not respect the seasons; it charges into fragile lives whether it's Christmas or not. We can all recall a Christmas where the outward festive atmosphere jarred against an inner burden.

The nature of this 'Christmas pain' is as varied as people's stories: the loneliness of separation, enduring an illness, adjusting to life after divorce, or simply the disappointment of a year that didn't turn out well. The Christmas ache might be the burden of unemployment and

financial strain, or, conversely, feeling enslaved by one's employment, a workload that barely eases over the holiday period. Then again, the Christmas blues could be as subtle as the heavy-heartedness of not living up to someone else's Christmas expectations.

How do we celebrate Christmas amidst pain? Glossing over the wound with tinsel is no help. Naming it is a start. Being free to speak about one's Christmas burden in loving company (and at an appropriate time) is a great gift.

Above all, the most healing thing we can do with our Christmas blues is to enter as fully as possible into the Christmas mystery itself, recognizing that it is precisely for people with wounded hearts that Christmas is designed. Put simply, Christmas is about healing. In Jesus, God entered human history not to decorate people's lives, but to save. The liturgical readings of Christmas speak not of romantic starry nights, but a piercing, saving light 'that darkness could not overpower' (Jn 1:5). The angelic voices rang out not Jingle Bells, but 'Glory to God... peace on earth' (Lk 2:14). The message of the Nativity of our Lord is that our God is truly with us. Even the saddest, most crushing experiences of human existence can be touched, made whole, by the Divine Love.

Let's not be afraid of the Christmas blues. Let our burden be a summons to grasp the true salvific meaning of Christmas,

to be open to the grace of the season and let it soak into our tender wounds.

Our home celebrations can reflect this. I leave you with this simple, 'round-the-kitchen-table' Advent ritual to remember deceased friends and relatives:

- Sharing: Who will you miss most this Christmas?
- Tell us a little about this person and what he/she means to you.
- Light a candle for this person.
- Say or sing together a favourite prayer which speaks of the hope we place in Jesus Christ our Saviour. •

