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A Blue Christmas? Celebrating with those who are suffering loss, pain and isolation.

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A Blue Christmas?

Celebrating with those who are suffering loss, pain and isolation.

By Chris Kan

This article is peer reviewed

The Christmas period¹ can be a time of striking opposites. Amongst the carols, presents, and mountains of food are often hidden stories of debt, fractured relationships, lost hopes and mental illness. The pandemic, and periods of enforced and chosen isolation, have brought all of these into sharp relief, especially at times that evoke the importance of family and communal celebration.

Liturgical celebrations can be an important buttress in assisting people to both survive and enter more deeply into the Christmas period. Gertrude Mueller observes that it is in ritual and rite that worshipping communities can

take into account our most painful human experiences of loss, grief, hunger, pain, sickness, jealousy, guilt and sinfulness. Slowly, and in good time, ritual time, our painful feelings are transformed into the feelings of reparation, repentance, hope and salvation'.²

Two of the key themes for the Advent and Christmas seasons are *waiting* and *hope*.³ Whilst these themes are both incarnational and eschatological in nature, many of those who walk through our church doors each December are both waiting and hoping, often in total unawareness, for peace, redemption, and renewal in their personal lives. They may have a longing for things to be better - or at least different to how they are now. The founder of *Pastoral Liturgy*, Russell Hardiman, reminded readers that the Christmas period was the very time in which we 'welcome the marginalised, welcome home the ones struggling with their life choices, (and) show an attitude of inclusiveness'.⁴

Few involved in the planning and preparation of liturgy are unaware, or untouched, by these factors. The more difficult task is integrating these realities within a worshipping community - either in the context of a stand-alone liturgy or as an overall lens for December celebrations.

A Blue Christmas

Regardless of where we celebrate the Christmas season - in the Northern Hemisphere with freezing temperatures, snow and being confined to the indoors, or the Southern Hemisphere with its very social, often outdoor celebrations - psychosocial difficulties such as anxiety, depression and

¹ I will use the term *Christmas* throughout this article to refer to the Advent and Christmas period, except where specifically noted.

² Gertrud Mueller Nelson, *To Dance with God: Family Ritual and Community Celebration* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 55.

³ For an excellent discussion of these themes see Adrien Nocent, *The Liturgical Year: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany (vol. 1)* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013).

⁴ Russell Hardiman, and Peta Wellstead. *The Years of the Year : the Paschal Mystery Celebrated in Christian Worship : Essays to Commemorate 25 Years of Pastoral Liturgy*. (Fremantle, W.A: Pastoral Liturgy Publications, College of Theology, University of Notre Dame Australia, 1997), 17.

relational issues are ever present. Many, regardless of location, have a difficult time at Christmas in terms of mood and emotion.

Christian communities have a role in supporting others through this period. Robert Schreiter⁵ suggests that congregations can become agents of care for others, in the face of traumatic events and experiences, through three distinct approaches:

- accompanying others with patience and care
- providing a hospitable environment of trust, kindness and safety
- reconnecting those who suffer to the broader community

A recent study provides a clinical confirmation to these ideas; that despite the Christmas season being notable for time pressures, social obligations and financial concerns, which affect the well-being of the community at large, religious practice is a protective factor.⁶ 'Religious Christians' – by which the study means practising - don't find Christmas as stressful in the weeks leading up to the celebration, nor do they suffer an emotional decline after Christmas when compared with the wider population.⁷

Liturgy that is purposefully designed to address the ambiguities of emotions and responses around the Christmas season, especially if approached via Schreiter's suggestions, is often called *Blue Christmas*.⁸ It is often stand-alone in style, i.e. utilising an order of prayer, song and symbol not connected to the regular cycle of services. Whilst this works well, and has become an anticipated moment in some worshipping communities, it is not the only model, and there are opportunities to connect these themes to a parish's normal liturgical life. For example, themes of restoration and healing connect easily with Evening Prayer / Vespers, as the symbols of light and entrusting to God what has occurred in the past, both recent and historical, are an effective link. Compline too is a viable option, as we pray for peace and deep rest from all that our day, and life, has brought us.

In reality, a morning setting may suit many communities and Morning Prayer / Lauds presents the opportunity to encounter the dawning of a new day, trusting in God's providence and mercy, providing resonance for those on a journey of hopeful healing. Both my research and experience suggest that this type of liturgy does not often occur within the context of Eucharist, perhaps as, with notable exceptions, its multi-layered symbolism and dense, established texts make it difficult for those returning to Church to access.

Regardless of form, these liturgies remain a ritual celebration - gathering in God's name to acknowledge, share and heal our suffering. This inner dynamism of moving from a place of retreat to a place of encounter creates

⁵ Armand Léon Van Ommen, 'Remembering for Healing: Liturgical Communities of Reconciliation Provide Space for Trauma.' in *Trauma and Lived Religion: Transcending the Ordinary*, edited by R. Ruard Ganzevoort and Srdjan Sremac, (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 203-23.

⁶ Michael Mutz, 'Christmas and Subjective Well-Being: a Research Note', *Applied Research Quality Life* 11, (2016).

⁷ Mutz, *Christmas and Subjective Well-Being*, 1352.

⁸ Also sometimes known as *Longest Night* (in the Northern Hemisphere), or a *Service of Solace* – to avoid any Elvis implications!

liminal space – a place of transition between ‘home and the destination’⁹ – where the love of God can be encountered. In the relative safety of ritual and rites we can move out of our fear and trauma by ‘remember rightly’: acknowledging ‘who we are, where we belong and what we hope for.’¹⁰

Gathering and Communicating

This paper cannot provide a ‘set’ liturgy that can be downloaded, printed and delivered (although at the end of this article I have provided some links which might help you do just that!). Each liturgical community has its own dynamics, history, and practices, so at best we can adapt someone else’s work with care. Wholesale importation generally ends up being less than satisfactory, and at worst irrelevant for those participating. Whilst I am holding the idea of a stand-alone celebration in mind, I propose some themes around which communities might think through their liturgical offerings this Christmas. Most of these are just good practice, and I hope helpful reminders.

Space: Sacred and Safe

Richard Giles, an Anglican liturgist who specialises in reordering worship spaces, bravely notes that the ‘seating plan of any liturgical assembly ... (has) ... the power to spell out, to first-timer and regular alike, exactly what is going on this room’.¹¹ There is a delicate balance to maintain between sharing each other’s burdens by companionable closeness yet providing enough room so that attendees can feel comfortable in their own space. It remains important to emphasise our interconnectedness and awareness of one another, downplaying status and privilege and building shared involvement.¹²

Depending on the arrangement of the building in which the liturgy will be celebrated, it may be difficult to arrange the space so that people can both see and be close to one another, without being pressed in. Circular spaces are congenial to community building, and a more traditional cross-shaped building may mean people space out too much. People have become used to spaces being defined for them when they attend worship in these pandemic times, so marking out space is a viable option. Roping off pews to encourage sitting in a particular area, utilising the nave or a smaller chapel, can all reduce the impact of a large church space.

Attendees, especially those estranged from Church communities, need to feel that the liturgy will be a ‘safe space’ physically, emotionally and spiritually. Encouraging people to bring a friend or support person, especially in the case of a stand-alone service, will assist in easing feelings of vulnerability and exposure, as will the availability of tissues, water, and easy access to exits. Feeling trapped physically, especially in the face of strong emotion, is not conducive to a ritual experience.

Texts and Language

⁹ J. Cilliers, 2009, ‘Worshipping in the ‘in-between’ times of transition: Reflections on the liminality of liturgy’, in *A faithful witness*, edited by H.J.C. Pieterse & C.H. Thesnaar (Bible Media, Wellington, 2007), 169.

¹⁰ M. Wolf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*. (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2006).

¹¹ Richard Giles, *Creating Uncommon Worship: Transforming the Liturgy of the Eucharist*. (United Kingdom: Canterbury Press, 2004), 56.

¹² Giles, *Creating Uncommon Worship*, 57.

How language is used in liturgy is always vital, and even more so in contexts where it may have had a history of being used to wound or control. Rather, considering how language can be used to build up, heal and sustain worshippers is central to worshipping communities' outreach to those on the margins. Adrian Nocent reminds us that we 'must ask ourselves whether or not the liturgical language, images and symbols we use are intelligible to our contemporaries'.¹³ When considering forms for worship that invite in those on the fringes of the Church, an awareness of both the way in which we use language, and the biblical texts we choose, are worth some sustained attention.

This especially applies when considering familiar texts, for example, the Lord's Prayer or the Hail Mary. These traditional texts can be comforting points of connection for those who are tentatively returning, but they may also be 'triggering' if Church has been part of the trauma people have suffered. We cannot, of course, plan for each and every individual case, but if we are privileged to know some background stories, we can make appropriate decisions in advance. The same logic applies to choosing a biblical translation for scripture texts - inclusive language for God can serve to avoid imagery that may be oppressive or remind worshippers of negative experiences.

Scripture is foundational in our discerning of what God is doing in the here and now, and the themes of waiting, preparation and hope are universal to our human experience. Those who struggle to celebrate Christmas are often addressed in the Advent texts¹⁴ - they are those who feel they have little hope, those forgotten and excluded. They hunger to be 'filled with good things', for relationships to be healed, for mercy to be shown.

While there are a myriad of scripture readings that could be used, the lectionary selections for Advent are helpful in themselves, adding a connection for those attending multiple services. Fortunately, the set readings are reasonably similar for both the Roman Catholic Lectionary and the Revised Common Lectionary.¹⁵

Sunday	Lectionary	Theme
Advent 1C	Psalm 25	In you, Lord my God, I put my trust
Advent 2C	Baruch 5: 1 - 9	Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction
Advent 3C	Isaiah 12:2-6	Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid
Advent 4C	Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)	The Visitation

Liturgies that are designed for meditation and reflection do not always need more words in the form of a sermon or homily. Allowing the power of proclaimed word, symbol, silence and music to heal and comfort participants

¹³ Adrien Nocent, *The Liturgical Year*, 4.

¹⁴ Diane Maodush-Pitzer 'Pastoral Issues in Advent', *Liturgy* 13, no. 3, (1996): 19-22

¹⁵ Readings available at <https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/lections.php?year=C&season=Advent>

is key. However, some communities may expect an oration as part of any church service. In that case I would urge both brevity and simplicity – more of a thought for the day rather than an elongated exposition.

Silence

Antonio Donghi beautifully notes that silence is ‘the living openness of the human heart towards the infinite.’¹⁶ While it can of course be difficult for those who are struggling with strong emotion, or who have no experience of Church or of contemplation, a contemplative attitude towards celebrations can create space for encounter, for listening and for presence. Liturgically, this can be helpfully enacted in two distinct ways. Firstly, the unhurried celebration of liturgy in which there are natural pauses and moments for reflection and contemplation. Allowing space for words and readings to resonate and echo back is important, especially if we have removed too much verbosity!

However, a more profound period of silence may also assist in entering deeply into the mystery of the moment - perhaps as a part of intercessory prayer, after the readings, or utilising a Taize-style extended silence of five to seven minutes. In these ways of doing silence, we continue our sense of being together as ‘liturgical silence is not individual, but communal: we are silent together, actively quiet, purposely still.’¹⁷

Music

Whilst the immediate thought for music at this time of year is often Carols, many people have stopped really ‘hearing’ them as they have been besieged since early October in advertisements and shopping centres. Making the service too ‘Christmassy’ can easily reinforce the painful experiences and negative emotions that make this time of year difficult for some. It is worth thinking through how music can be used as a point of connection and as an opportunity for meditation, reflection, and healing.

There are two distinct ways in which music can play a role in solace and healing during liturgy: Music *in* therapy and music *as* therapy.¹⁸ Whilst both are modes of participation, they differ in the role the congregation plays. Music *in* therapy describes how music may be listened to during a liturgy, encouraging reflection and entering into the present moment. This may be a sung solo, an instrumentalist or a recording. Solo instruments are very effective and if your community has a talented musician – I have used both a cellist and clarinetist to great effect – this can add a great deal to the liturgy.

There are a wide variety of secular songs that make excellent choices for a reflective moment. For example, Ron Sexsmith’s ‘Maybe this Christmas’¹⁹ contains a facing of the present reality (‘maybe this Christmas will mean something more’) with the opportunity for concrete action (‘maybe forgiveness

¹⁶ Antonio Donghi, *Words And Gestures In The Liturgy* (United States: Liturgical Press, 2009).

¹⁷ David Philippart, *Saving Signs, Wondrous Words* (United States: Liturgy Training Publications, 1996) 21, quoted in Giles, *Creating Uncommon Worship*, 128.

¹⁸ C. J. Calitz, ‘Healing liturgy: The role of music and singing’, *Verbum et Ecclesia* 38, no.1(2017).

¹⁹ Ron Sexsmith, *Maybe this Christmas*, Nettwerk Music Group 2002).

will ask us to call, someone we love, someone we've lost'). Even though secular, there is a strong sense of Advent hopefulness and encounter in the text.

The second way music can be helpful is music as therapy, most usually occurring in liturgy as singing together. Outside of the fact that communal singing has incredible mental health benefits²⁰, texts that pickup themes of 'praise, lament, worship, benediction, reframing, participation ... emotions of grief, anger, aggression, depression, disappointment'²¹ can provide an encounter with our own reality and a sharing of each other's burdens, even though unnamed.

One helpful example comes from Australian text writer Elizabeth Smith, who often provides new words to existing tunes. The last verse of her hymn, 'When will it be that the waiting will end' brings all of the 'baggage' that participants bring to worship, especially the hurt, grief and loss, and offers it to God for transformation:

*Holy Eternal One, over to you
Now we hand all that we can and can't do.
Hopes, tears and questions: we offer you these;
Give us, in answer, a share of your peace.*²²

In a more Christmassy vein, John Bell from the Wild Goose Worship Group based in Iona, offers earthy texts which pick up both Advent themes with a good deal of honesty. 'Not the powerful' from his collection 'Innkeepers and Light Sleepers'²³ brings both a sense of justice and inclusion. It begins 'Not the powerful, not the privileged ... were the first to hold God's hand', and continues in this manner, dismantling any sense of pedigree or achievement, instead championing the homeless, wandering and forgotten in the Christmas narrative.

In conclusion: Afterwards

The liturgy after the liturgy is important too! After acknowledging and praying for their own needs and the needs of the wider community, connecting with others is essential, as much as participants can manage. Sharing the sign of Peace at the end of a liturgy, safely as local guidelines permit, draws people into a dialogue with one another. Sharing a supper, a glass of wine, or tea and coffee, extends this connection, allowing participants to re-integrate before returning to 'normal' life.

This short reflection is only a beginning, hopefully stimulating some ideas for leaders within their own communities to design and offer opportunities for those who find the Christmas season difficult. The themes I have offered are ways of providing 'safe' points of entry for those estranged from the Church, and whilst the specifics of texts, music and arrangement will differ in each

²⁰ For example, Laura Plumb and Theodore Stickley 'Singing to Promote Mental Health and Well-being.' *Mental Health Practice* 20, no. 8 (2017): 31.

²¹ Calitz, *Healing liturgy: The role of music and singing*, 8.

²² E. J. Smith, *Songs for Saints and Sinners*, (Bentleigh Victoria, Beaut Resources, 2008).

²³ John L. Bell and Graham Maul, *Innkeepers and Light Sleepers: Seventeen New Songs for Christmas* (Iona, Wild Goose Publications, 2004).

unique worshipping community, the importance of meeting people where they are at, does not.

The Iona based Wild Goose Worship Group, in their wonderful book *Doing December Differently*, observe that there are many different versions of family and solo Christmases, both full of ambiguities and tensions.²⁴ When we connect our communal liturgical life to the realities of the 'everyday' lives of those who attend our places of worship, we deepen both our relationships with one another, and our understanding of where and how the Spirit is at work. Surely this might go a long way towards easing a *Blue Christmas*.

Postscript

For reference, here are some of the more helpful planning ideas available on the internet.

<http://www.textweek.com/christmas.htm>

<http://www.clergyleadership.com/hope/blueChristmas.cfm>

<https://www.rotation.org/topic/blue-christmas-resources-helping-people-deal-with-loss-and-despair-this-advent-2020>

<https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/11/blue-christmas-worship-resource-index.html>

²⁴ Nicola Slee & Rosie Miles, *Doing December Differently: An Alternative Christmas Handbook*. (United Kingdom: Wild Goose Publications, 2006).