

Blue Christmas: Remembering Those Passed

My family has experienced the dull pain of grief during the Christmas holidays – firstly for a father, and, secondly, for a brother. And it is the same for millions of others, but we have to be jolly because we now have young children and that (we are bombarded by the media telling us so) is what Christmas is all about – happy times, smiling faces, overindulgence, TV repeats and bulging Christmas stockings... and that doesn't even touch the joyous religious significance of the Christian holiday.

That first Christmas is especially hard. How are we supposed to act? Grit our teeth and carry on? Wallow in our emotions? Laugh or not laugh? Speak of our memories or not mention their name? Every one, and every family, has their own way of coping (or not coping) with Christmas and little rituals develop over the years... we now toast my brother and my husband's father with a glass of bubbly at the beginning of lunch.

One Christmas tradition in most of the CPJ Field branches (where space allows) is the putting up of a 'memory tree' on 1st December in the reception area. These are decorated with hand-written tags adorned with the names of lost loved ones and thoughtful messages. The tags are mailed to past clients (two or three years back) with an invitation to return them directly to the funeral home or pop in and deliver them personally. Non-clients are also invited to take part via a notice in the window – many take the opportunity. (Tree below in SE Skinner & Sons, Brighton)



Whether families decide to return a tag or not, their purpose has been fulfilled. The connection between funeral director and family is maintained through this contact, as Emily Lovick, Funeral Director at SE Skinner & Sons, Brighton, explains: “It can be such a lonely time at Christmas and we want our families to know that they are still in our thoughts.”

With this in mind, Emily organised her first ‘Service of Remembrance’ this year in conjunction with the Reverend Trevor Buxton at St Martin’s Church. The traditional service, with its mix of hymns, readings and poems, was attended by about 50 people who received invitations along with their tags. Emily was asked many times at the service, and since, whether it would become an annual gathering. “We will definitely carry on with this service. Our families found so much comfort from meeting other people and families grieving during this traditionally happy time.”

The inaugural Brighton service centred on the lighting of a candle, ‘as a sign of Love and Remembrance of your loved ones’ (as reads the Order of Service), which was followed by a period of reflection while the organist played *Ave Maria*.

The lighting of a candle for each remembered person also provides the highlight of the longest established service, organised by Cooper & Son in Lewes. The Funeral Director Grace Gasson took over the running of the service, held at Southover Church, nine years ago and moved the service, originally on All Soul’s Day, into December. “The religious nature of the service was becoming less relevant to clients and by moving it nearer to Christmas it could go some way to fill the void which exists for the bereaved – a time when they are unable to give and receive cards and gifts from their loved one.

“The service is advertised in the town and we sing Christmas Carols, light a candle for each person as their name is read out by the clergy and have a choir or a singer from Glyndebourne providing music during a period of reflection. Then people are invited to bring up flowers to the altar in memory of their loved one. It is an emotional service and it brings the Lewes community together to allow people to reflect and cry, without embarrassment. Everyone helps each other through.”

Another long-standing service, this time religious, is organised by Principal Funeral Director Christopher Stringer and Father Martin Morgan of St Margaret, Rottingdean. Father Martin explains the idea behind their ‘Blue Christmas’ memorial service: “It is especially for those who are feeling terrible as they try to cope with their loss at a time when everyone else is rushing about getting ready for Christmas and wishing everyone a Merry Christmas. It is a very warm service, but with lots of tears.”

At this year’s ‘Blue Christmas’, the reading, written by Father Martin, was given by (family patriarch) Colin Field and it spoke of the empty space which is left behind when loved ones die, how that space is filled with emotional turmoil (for the bereaved) and how this dark space can be lightened by the thought of being reunited with them in the future.

Father Martin then asked: Do clergy really believe what they say at funerals when they declare that there is a future for those who die? Are we convinced or is it just sentimental twaddle? “Of course, we believe what we say,” confirms Father Martin (if there was any doubt).



The highlight of this service is also the procession with candles when the 140 members of the congregation walk with lit candles up to the 'Blue Christmas' tree and place their candles on the stone floor. They then tie their hand-written tag, remembering their loved one(s), on to the branches. This tree remains in the church until 6th January and after the service the church stays open until midnight, giving the opportunity for peaceful reflection. (see the Tree below)



Other memorial services have different ways of remembering the deceased. For example, Howard Coote, Principle Funeral Director, holds a memorial service in St Saviour's, Eastbourne, with three ministers in attendance. It is advertised as: 'A Service of Thanksgiving for Departed Loved Ones' in the parish magazine and nearly 1,200 invitations are sent out, with a tag included. During the service the names of those to be remembered are read out while the families bring their tags up to the altar. Their tag is then taken back to Haine & Son and tied onto the memorial tree.



Howard explains the appeal of the service: “It is an act of remembrance and many of our families love to be part of the service. It is not only those recently deceased who are remembered on the tags, but the names of past generations are also added by the families.



‘We had really bad snow a few years back, and we thought no one would turn up, but about 50 people walked to the church and one gentleman in his seventies managed to come in with socks over his shoes to stop him slipping everywhere. That is what the service means to people and each year we have a diary in the church showing the date of next years’ service so names can be left if they wish to stay on the mailing list.’

As with all the memorial services, families are invited to stay behind for refreshments and this is the time when people mingle and chat about their experience of loss. “It brings families together,” explains Christopher Stringer. “We get stopped in the street afterwards, and receive calls and cards, thanking us for helping them through this difficult Christmas period.”

And, I guess, that is what all of us need... the recognition that Christmas is not all shiny baubles and cheesy Christmas jumpers for everyone. Sadness, desolation and loneliness are as much a part of the Christmas reality as dried out turkey, hangovers and unwanted presents. It’s good to feel that someone cares and that you are not alone.

