

A Blue Christmas Service

A Sermon Preached by The Rev Ian M Delinger

on December 15, 2024

Isaiah 49:13–16 / Psalm 86:1-7 / "Advent Calendar" by Rowan Williams / Luke 1.67-79

*Let us call upon God
Who was, Who is, and Who is to come.*

When I was then a University Chaplain, I was afforded the opportunity to be Chaplain on a cruise ship for Christmas in 2011, 2012 and 2014: 2 weeks in the Southern Caribbean and twice for a week around the Canary Islands. This was a new experience for me, and I learned quite a bit about pastoral ministry.

It was also new for experienced cruise passengers. You see, Chaplains on cruise ships are almost exclusively retired white men who relish the opportunity to do a few services in exchange for a free cruise and time to soak in the sun by the pool with their wives, away from the miserable cold of Britain. That's sooo not me! So, I just was Chaplain for the whole of the cruises.

My first eye-opener was with the non-commissioned crew ... the "*below deck*" staff, if you will. I had heard of "*spiritual deprivation*", but I had never seen it ... until then. The non-commissioned staff on British cruise ships are overwhelmingly from the Goa province of India and from The Philippines. Both regions are heavily Roman Catholic, as were these crew members. The non-commissioned crew are on 9, 12, 15-month contracts, unlike the commissioned crew who are on 3 or 6-month contracts. Chaplains are only on the Christmas and Easter cruises, and sometimes round-the-world cruises. These men had not had the Sacrament in many months. When they saw me on board, they were asking – very desperately – when I was having Mass and hearing Confessions.

The other dynamic was with passengers. You go on a Christmas Cruise to have a really fun time in the sun and to overindulge. And that was certainly going on. But from the first time I stood at the bar by the pool trying to make iced tea from a

mug of hot tea and as much ice as the bewildered bartender would give me, my job became apparent.

A couple of times a day – particularly at any of the bars on the ship – the person next to me waiting for their drink would strike up a conversation which eventually led to something like this:

The kids decided to get Mum this cruise for Christmas because Dad died earlier this year, and we just wanted to get away from all the pain.

Christmas is always a difficult time with family and all the pressure with the commercialization, I just thought I would get away.

I had a really bad break-up and I just didn't want to be around all the memories that Christmas brings up.

There was a lot of pain and sorrow on those ships that was out of sync with why the passengers were there. When I experienced this on the first cruise, I decided to host a Blue Christmas Service.

I asked the Roman Catholic Chaplain if we could do this together, and he agreed. The Cruise Director said it was fine and assigned a staffer to assist us on the day. She listed the service in the Cruise News. I threw together the worship from what a priest back in Manchester had sent me and customized it for this situation. I put the worship into PowerPoint. I can't remember if we had a recorded backing track or a live musician for the hymns. We made sure there was plenty of Kleenex. The time came, and Fr Stefan, the staffer and I waited in the designated conference room-cum-chapel. But we didn't have to wait very long. A couple of dozen passengers and crew showed up. And together we lifted up our sorrows to God.

On the second cruise, the Cruise Director did not want a Blue Christmas Service. On the third cruise, a much smaller ship, there were again a couple dozen passengers who showed up to lift up their sorrows.

I'm sure that everyone there realized fairly quickly upon embarking the ship that pain is not geographical, and that it's the worst place to try and hide from the glitziness of Christmas. Each day on a Christmas Cruise, as you get closer to Christmas Eve, more and more decorations appear, more Christmas music is played and the Cruise Director's staff get more and more enthusiastic about getting passengers to participate in their Christmas fun! And there is no place to go! The Blue Christmas Service was their escape!

December and the run-up to Christmas is a difficult time of year wherever you are. Pain, anxiety and loss are not geographic. Coming together for Blue Christmas gives you the opportunity to acknowledge both and to bring that pain somewhere safe. And it's not Christmas in here. No poinsettias. No Santa. No endless carols. In here, what's going on around you doesn't have to be out of sync with what's going on inside you. It's Advent – the time when we prepare and wait ... as Zechariah did.

Here, now, we can lift up whatever is going on for us, and be with God – God:

- *Who has inscribed you on the palms of His hands.*
- *To whom you can lift up your soul.*
- *Who is good and forgiving.*
- *Who has great love toward all who call upon Him.*
- *Who gives ear to your prayer.*
- *Who will not forget you!*

And in this time of waiting, watching and praying, we will know that we have already received the One who

*gives light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
and guides our feet into the way of peace.*