

Blue Christmas Service In the palm of God's Hand Leaders Guide



What you will need

- Advent Wreath – with a central light to represent the Christ-candle (unless you are happy to light the one on your Advent wreath before midnight Mass on Christmas Eve)
- Hazelnuts in shell

Gentle music or well-known Advent /Christmas song

Opening Responses

- Reader We light the first light on our Advent wreath.
**All A light to represent hope –
a single flame that prevents the darkness from overwhelming us –
even when loss makes our life seem empty of light.**
- Reader We light the second light on our Advent wreath
**All A light to represent love –
that though sorrow shared is not sorrow halved –
sorrow shared brings us solidarity with our sisters and brothers.**
- Reader We light the third light on our Advent wreath
**All A light to represent joy –
because our lives did have joy
and though it feels lost to us now,
God has promised that one day it will last forever.**
- Reader We light our fourth candle
**All A light to represent peace –
the peace of heart and mind we long for
and which we hope to find tonight
in the presence of God
and the companionship of one another.**

Scripture Reading - from Isaiah 49: 13-16

Thus says the Lord:

In a time of favour I have answered you,
on a day of salvation I have helped you;
I have kept you and given you
as a covenant to the people,
to establish the land,
to apportion the desolate heritages;
saying to the prisoners, 'Come out',
to those who are in darkness, 'Show yourselves.'

They shall feed along the ways,
on all the bare heights shall be their pasture;
they shall not hunger or thirst,
for he who has pity on them will lead them,
and by springs of water will guide them.

And I will turn all my mountains into a road,
and my highways shall be raised up.
Lo, these shall come from far away,
and lo, these from the north and from the west,
and these from the land of Syene.

Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth;
break forth, O mountains, into singing!
For the Lord has comforted his people,
and will have compassion on his suffering ones.

But Zion said, 'The Lord has forsaken me,
my Lord has forgotten me.'
Can a woman forget her nursing-child,
or show no compassion for the child of her womb?
Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you.
See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands;

Hymn – choose something that everyone will probably know – e.g. Silent Night, O Little Town of Bethlehem, In the Bleak Midwinter

Short reflection / homily (ideas – use as much or as little as feels appropriate to your circumstances)

In our scripture, reading, we hear the prophet Isaiah talking to the whole people of Israel. They were in a time of deep desolation as they had been forced off their land into exile. Many of them felt like God had abandoned them. Isaiah was trying to remind them of God's care for them and his promise to look after them. His words are beautiful:

God says to the prisoners, 'Come out',
to those who are in darkness, 'Show yourselves.'
They shall feed along the ways,
on all the bare heights shall be their pasture;
they shall not hunger or thirst,
neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down,
for he who has pity on them will lead them,
and by springs of water will guide them.

We might find ourselves reminded of the Good Shepherd – who cares for the weakest and those most in need of love and consolation.

As we know, though, words can be lovely – and they can feel comforting – sometimes. But when we are facing difficult circumstances, they can feel empty and hollow. We know people mean well – but how we actually feel is lonely and lost and isolated. Like the Israelites we feel as if God has abandoned us – as if God has forgotten us.

And again, Isaiah comes up with some helpful images... can a mother forget her baby? Well, yes, sometimes deep rifts happen in people's lives and this can happen. But God says that even if the people closest to us abandon us, he never will. He cannot forget us. He created each one of us and, in a way we cannot fully imagine, has each of our names written on the palm of his hand.

We will pick up on this image of being held in God's hand – in what may seem to be an odd way for a church service! I would like to invite you to take one of the hazelnuts that will be passed around and just hold it for a few moments.

The first thing we notice is how very hard the shell is – as solid as wood. When we are feeling loss or pain or distress, one of our first reactions can be to create a shell around ourselves. This is natural – it is normal to want to protect ourselves from further hurt – further pain.

Unlike other nuts, our hazelnuts are smooth and shiny – others are rough and have sharp edges... but, despite its hardness, our hazelnut is gentle under our finger... smooth to the touch and easy on our hand.

Inside our nut is the whole point of it – the kernel – the seed which, under the right circumstances would grow into a tree and which in its turn could go on to bear fruit. This is within us too. For most of us here, this seed – this kernel feels too vulnerable... we feel the need to protect it. This too is normal. But we trust to the hope that, one day, when the time is right – when the circumstances are right – this small seed of life inside us – this seed of new hope will germinate and begin to grow. Our sadness and our sorrow will never leave us completely – but the shell of our suffering will one day break down and the life within us will emerge and bear fruit.

Here are some words written by a mystic called Julian of Norwich. She had what she called "Revelations of Divine Love" and described them in great detail. Here is the one that has become famous – because of its simplicity and deep meaning – especially for us today.

I saw that for us God is everything that is good, comforting, and helpful. He is our clothing who wraps us up and holds us close for love..."

"And with this insight he also showed me a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand. It seemed to me as round as a ball. I gazed at it and thought, 'What can this be?' The answer came thus, 'It is everything that is made.' I marvelled how this could be, for it was so small it seemed it might fall suddenly into nothingness. Then I heard the answer, 'It lasts, and ever shall last, because God loves it. All things have their being in this way by the grace of God.'"

Revelations of Divine Love, Julian of Norwich

Julian had the insight that the nut somehow represented the whole of Creation, held in being by God – held in the palm of God's hand. It exists – and each one of us exists – because God loves us... Those we have loved and lost exist too – not in ways we can hold and touch – but they, like this nut – like us – are held forever in the palm of God's hand.

Whether we find it easy to feel or not at this moment, try to imagine this nut as everything in existence being held in God's hand... and how it feels to hold all this precious life there. You may want to hold it tight – or simply rest in your hand.

Imagine that this nut is you – strange I know... but this is you – your name – the name of your loved one – the thing that is making you dread Christmas – all of this held in the palm of God's hand.

You are welcome to take it away with you – and put it in a pocket or on your bedside table – or somewhere you will be able to see it over the next few days... and when things are tough, to hold it and remember this service – and the prayers that will continue to be offered for you by this community.

Song or short piece of reflective music

Intercessions

We pray for those we have loved and lost – or the situation that is giving us pain today.

(Pause)

Lord, in your mercy – hear our prayer.

We pray for our family and friends – who are precious to us but sometimes feel to add to our burden even if they do not want to or mean to.

(Pause)

Lord, in your mercy – hear our prayer.

We thank God for the kindness and compassion of others – even when we have not felt able to receive it as fully as we would like.

(Pause)

Lord, in your mercy – hear our prayer.

We pray for those who have never known what it means to be precious and held in someone's love – and who feel lost and alone this Christmas.

(Pause)

Lord, in your mercy – hear our prayer.

We place ourselves and our prayer in the hands of God and into the intercession of Mary who held the her infant Son in her arms in Bethlehem – and his body outside the walls of Jerusalem – and who trusted through it all that she and all entrusted to her care are held in the palm of God's hand.

Closing Responses

Reader God of mercy and compassion,
 we have come to you in our sorrow – our fear – our brokenness
 and heard words of comfort and sensed your love and consolation.
 As we prepare to return to our homes and the situations we are struggling with,
 we ask your blessing on us and those we love.

All The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Reader And in any times of difficulty that lie ahead,
 may we remember that we are held forever in the palm of your hand.

All Amen

Closing Song



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