A ‘Blue Christmas’ service, or period of reflection, takes its name from the Elvis Presley song. It aims to provide comfort and light for times when pain seems to be the only gift under the tree; when the joy we often talk about at Christmas seems far away. Many people are suffering now, in this country and throughout the world, from this cruel pandemic. It seems to aggravate all the other facets of suffering endured by so many people: physical and mental illness, bereavement, poverty, violence, hunger; homelessness; unemployment, loneliness and so on. The Christmas story is for all these people.

Although this message is particularly important this year, the social restrictions make our normal ways of celebrating the true meaning of Christmas more difficult. In Ilkley, the churches have organised a ‘Blue Christmas’ service in the past few years. This year, we are producing this outline: people may use it for reflection at home, and church service leaders can incorporate elements into worship. We trust that God will speak through our efforts, to help us all come closer to the true meanings of this Christmas season. If anyone has any particular difficulty, you are encouraged to contact one of the church leaders who will try to help you.

Christians, following the example of Jesus Christ, have always had a particular ministry to walk with those who suffer. The prophet Isaiah speaks of the coming Messiah as the suffering servant. The Apostle Paul reminds us that Jesus did not grasp his equality with God, but chose to empty himself and to die on a cross for our salvation. In Matthew’s Gospel we are enjoined to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to visit the sick and those in prison, for in ministering to those in need we are serving Christ himself. Each of us is bearing our own hurts. We may be immersed in our own suffering. We may be devastated by our own loss. We may feel that we are alone, abandoned by our friends, deserted by our families. We may even feel that we are forsaken by God. It can be difficult for us to remember that Christ is always with us. But we are here because the God who came to us as a little child, who dwelt among us, who died for us, who in dying experienced for himself the devastating feeling of God-forsaken-ness, who rose triumphant from the grave, who sent the Holy Spirit the Comforter, would not forsake us in our deepest need. We have come searching for solace in the presence of God.

Let us pray: O God of peace, who taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, and that in quietness and confidence shall be our strength, by the might of your Spirit lift us we pray to your presence that we may be still and know that you are God. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen. (Book of Common Prayer)
Bob Davies, a retired Methodist minister in Oldham, put together a book of reflections in our first lockdown period. In this, he quotes wise words from CS Lewis, the creator of the Narnia stories and close friend of JRR Tolkien who wrote the Lord of the Rings books. In 1948, Lewis wrote the following in the light of the recently emerged threat of nuclear weapons:

In one way we think a great deal too much of the atomic bomb. 'How are we to live in an atomic age?' I am tempted to reply: 'Why, as you would have lived in the sixteenth century when the plague visited London almost every year, or as you would have lived in a Viking age when raiders from Scandinavia might land and cut your throat any night; or indeed, as you are already living in an age of cancer, an age of syphilis, an age of paralysis, an age of air raids, an age of railway accidents, an age of motor accidents.'

In other words, do not let us begin by exaggerating the novelty of our situation. Believe me, dear sir or madam, you and all whom you love were already sentenced to death before the atomic bomb was invented: and quite a high percentage of us were going to die in unpleasant ways. We had, indeed, one very great advantage over our ancestors — anaesthetics; but we have that still. It is perfectly ridiculous to go about whimpering and drawing long faces because the scientists have added one more chance of painful and premature death to a world which already bristled with such chances and in which death itself was not a chance at all, but a certainty.

This is the first point to be made; and the first action to be taken is to pull ourselves together. If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things — praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts — not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs. They may break our bodies (a microbe can do that) but they need not dominate our minds.

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This hath He done, and shall we not adore Him?
This shall He do, and can we still despair?
Come, let us quickly fling ourselves before Him,
Cast at His feet the burden of our care.

Through life and death, through sorrow and through sinning
He shall suffice me, for He hath sufficed:
Christ is the end, for Christ was the beginning,
Christ the beginning, for the end is Christ.

(verses from the hymn: Hark what a sound,
by Frederic W H Myers)

I know somehow that only when it is dark enough can you see the stars.
(Martin Luther King Jr)

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness - on them light has shined.
(Isaiah 9, v2)

My hope is also rooted in the kind of God we believe in. It is the God who saw that Pharaoh and the Egyptians needed to be freed from whatever evil had corrupted their minds before they started to enslave and mistreat the Hebrews. God also saw that the Hebrews needed to be freed from the misery slavery had inflicted on them. The reading of the first chapters of Exodus presents us with the image of a God who is relentless in seeking the freedom of both the enslaver and the slave.
(The Revd Dr Paul Nzakahayo)

For full details of the member churches of Churches Together in Ilkley, and their contact details please see our website:
www.churchestogetherilkley.org.uk