Many years ago I was told that it’s alright for your congregation to know that you bleed, but never to let them know when you are bleeding. I think the recommendation meant that it was appropriate that your congregation needed to know that you were human but not necessarily all the gruesome details in the midst of one’s pain. Today I will take a risk. The risk that I’m speaking of is that I understand grief at Christmas. The details aren’t important, but it is relevant that you know that I’m not speaking of something of which I am unfamiliar.

Grief at Christmas time is a unique experience. The circumstances of losing someone you love to death, divorce or distance are always different. The event is a horrible, hurtful, humbling experience. But to have an event of this magnitude at Christmas time often multiplies its effects tenfold. Let me try to explain why. Although it would be easier for me to use theory, I’m going to share a story with you instead. He was in his late forties. He was a loving husband and devoted father. By all accounts he was a healthy, happy, honourable man. One night just before Christmas, he was playing hockey with a dozen of his closest friends. One moment he was shooting the puck, the next moment he was dead. Later doctors indicated that his massive heart attack likely killed him before he hit the ice. His beautiful wife and two daughters were devastated. The truth is that he was an organized, optimistic, open minded individual. He had already completed all of the Christmas shopping and paid all the bills for the month. Everything was ready for Christmas the moment his heart stopped beating.

I believe that his huge extended family addressed his death in the best possible ways and it’s that story that I would like to share with you in this week’s pastoral letter, about how one might address grief at Christmas. Let me begin by saying it’s not easy. One might find oneself emotionally paralyzed, easily provoked and quite possibly in such intense pain that it’s next to impossible to make significant decisions about a funeral and/or celebration of life without the counsel of the wise people around you.

In the story that I share with you today the family gathered together immediately at the hospital. There must have been twenty to thirty people in the room when I arrived. They gave everyone an opportunity to go into the room and say good-bye in their own way. They gathered everyone around the bed for a time of prayer and then they carefully orchestrated that no-one would be alone in the next twenty-four hours. They held each other, they cried with each other and they shared memories. The pain must have been unbearable. But no-one had to suffer that pain alone. Each individual was permitted the opportunity to say whatever they needed to say to express their feelings and thoughts in his memory.

It was decided that the funeral would be held at the church at night. It was a candlelight communion service with a funeral liturgy that was the custom of that community. Several people were encouraged to speak about their memories and experiences. The family selected the hymns, the readings and the prayers. Although it was a traditional funeral from the Book of Common Prayer, the family and friends’ participation in the service made it one of the most personal services most of the attendees had ever experienced in a church. It was a funeral designed by the family.

As you can well imagine Christmas Eve and Christmas day were extremely hard experiences. The family gathered. Friends were encouraged to drop by during a very specific time period. In the family gathering there was an empty chair at the table. There was a toast to the deceased. There were memories shared. There were laughter and tears. They began to address the new reality. He was gone from this world but in the blink of an eye, in the presence of Christ.

If you happen to be going through grief this Christmas, may I please make a few gentle pastoral suggestions? Your circumstances are unique to you alone. No-one can possibly know how you feel. So here are my suggestions. First, please be very gentle with yourself. Try not to make any major decisions in the first few months after a major loss. If you have to make decisions, do so in consultation with a few people that you trust with your life. Secondly, find someone to talk to. You can begin with a good friend, but there may come a time when you need to spend time with someone who is qualified to walk you through your grief. Third, although you may be very hurt and angry, please seek out your pastor. Take some time to pray, to reflect and to remember. Fourth, if at all possible only be alone when you want to be. The rest of the time, allow those around you to love and support you.

Blessings, Fr Stephen