

**The Cathedral Church of the Redeemer**  
**Christmas Eve, year 'B'**  
**24 December 2011**  
**The Rev'd Leighton Lee**

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"Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth: I can't remember him." Aged and in retirement, Pontius Pilate is in conversation. The name of a crucified carpenter has come up; it is meaningless to him. This scene comes from a famous story published by Anatole France on Christmas Day, 1891. There is no denying, of course, that we live in a world where the words France puts into the mouth of Pilate are uttered by more and more people. But *you* are here tonight, you have come to this place; and in a world in which the exercise of choice is a supreme virtue, this is no small act. Whatever the reason, you are here and that in itself *is no small act of faith*, which says that you are not to be counted among the Pilates of the world who can only say, "Jesus of Nazareth: I can't remember him." You sit there, and I stand here, and hear the message of the angels: "Unto you," – unto us – "unto you is born this day a Saviour who is Christ the Lord." We have come, despite all the evidence to the contrary, because we suspect that this outrageous message is indeed true; we have come as an act of faith; we have come to see and to remember.

We have come, like the shepherds, to see this thing that has come to pass. Had the shepherds not gotten up and gone to see what had happened, had they not believed that the divine could come among, and to, the ordinary, who knows if you and I would be here this evening? So, like them, we have come to see and, having seen, may go out into the world with astonishing news: that divine life, divine work and divine meaning are not found by gazing into the stars but in the ordinary, even primitive, places and events of the world; and that salvation doesn't come to us from beyond the stars, but emerges in the midst of human life and experience.

We have come to remember that, despite the grandeur and majesty of so many forms of Christianity, and despite its triumph in terms of sheer numbers of believers, Jesus is not known in grandeur and power but in austerity and weakness. No king has ever willingly been born in such mean estate; no king has ever willingly given up his wealth and glory and splendour; no king has ever willingly deigned to live among the most lowly and most vile. But this king is a king like no other, and his kingdom displays none of the trappings of earthly royalty. He comes not in pomp and glory but in humility and simplicity. He comes into ordinary human life – into your life and mine. The manger isn't simply a quaint detail of the narrative. It's a symbol that tells us that Jesus was born as one of us. It tells us that Jesus is born in us, rough, ill-formed and unsuitable though we may be, so that we may be carriers of the divine. Our simple, even crude, humanity is room enough to make his dwelling. Our stony, even cold, hearts are soft enough and warm enough to be his throne.

We have come in faith because we have heard the simple message of the angels, a simple message that has a grandeur and majesty beyond measure: the God of heaven has been born as one of us and for us and within us. And so we have come, timorously, believing ourselves unworthy, to peer nervously over the edge of the manger at the incredible sight of so lowly a king because, having heard the song of the angels, we believe that it may even be – fantastic though it is to say – true. When we look into the manger, we see there our own destiny. We see that our humanity is raised to divine status and that we are all children of God. You and I may believe ourselves to be unworthy of the gift of divine life, and we may think we are too rough, too unsuitable, too unready to receive this gift. But the baby in the manger tells us that God believes none of these things about us. The baby tells us that God has become what we are, so that we, in turn, may become what he is.

The real secret of Christmas is precisely this. The real secret isn't that God deigned to lower himself to become merely human, but that he esteemed humanity so much that he raised us up. The baby in the manger says to you and to me that the limitations of our lives are not limitations to God, nor do our humble circumstances prevent us from claiming our destiny as children of God. The good news is that we find life in Jesus' example. If that is true, if it is true that this baby is the means by which we may become more than we are, if it is true that the author of all things has been born as one of us, and within us, then everything is changed. It may be difficult to look at the baby in the manger, for who can bear the sight of all that holiness when our own lives are so tawdry? It may be difficult to look at the baby in the manger, for who can contemplate such pure love when our own love is so often self-centred? It may be difficult to look at the baby in the manger, for who can believe in the amazing new life he offers us? And it may be most difficult to look when we know that in him we find the pattern our own lives, and who of us can become so low when most of us, most of the time, wish to be so high?

Yet, despite our shortcomings and uncertainties, we have heard the message, and we have come, and we cannot resist a look, even if it is only a passing glance, at the baby. And when we see him, we *know* we have a reason to hope and to be joyful. Even if we only stop and glance quickly we will find that nothing can ever be the same again. In that rude manger is our heart's content, most sincere desire and life's destiny. And having seen his countenance of love, we **can** say, "Jesus? Jesus of Nazareth: oh yes – I remember him. I saw him once. And that changed my life forever."

*Lord, enable us to truly hear again the message of the Christmas angels that Jesus is born for us. Open our eyes to see the miracle of your divine life born as one of us. Open our hearts to receive the gift of your divine life within us. Open our arms to bestow the gift of your divine life to everyone. And give us all the peace and joy of this holy season. Amen.*