



**Midnight Mass**  
**Rev Richard Bonifant**  
Christmas Eve  
24 December 2025

In the name of God, Creating, Redeeming and Giving us Life. Amen.

“It’s a dangerous business, going out of your door. You step onto the road, and if you don’t keep your feet, there’s no telling where you might be swept off to.”

Many of us yearn to travel—to go somewhere we have never been before, to experience new things, to meet new people, and maybe even have a modest adventure or two. This desire to expand our frame of reference is an innate part of being human.

Pilgrimage is one expression of such feelings and is a practice found in many religious traditions. A pilgrimage is more than just a physical journey; it is a spiritual journey both towards a place of significance as well as a journey within ourselves.

The greater purpose of a pilgrimage is the journey of self-discovery that almost always seems to take place.

In the Christian tradition, there are many different pilgrimage routes across the world. Some of you may have walked parts of the Camino across Northern Spain. Here in New Zealand, many have travelled to Ōihi in the Bay of Islands to visit the site of the first Christmas service held in Aotearoa in 1814. But the greatest Christian pilgrimage has always been to visit the Holy Land—to walk the same pathways that Jesus once walked.

Christian theology has long affirmed that God can be encountered here and now, that there is no need to go anywhere in search of God. And yet despite this, Christians over the centuries have continued to vote with their feet by travelling to the place where it all happened.

At one level, I agree that God can be seen and felt here and now. And yet I have done what millions of others have done before me—I have travelled to Israel/Palestine to visit the places where Jesus lived his life.

Why go all that way? After all, most of the Holy sites lack credibility. Some have likened them to second-century tourist traps rather than places that actually mark where Jesus truly said or did things. Scepticism is certainly one of my travelling companions. So why go? More than anything, I wanted to experience the story of Jesus that I have known my entire life in the place where it happened and to see if that changed my understanding. And while I am sceptical of the authenticity of many holy sites, that does not change the fact that millions of pilgrims have visited them over the centuries. I wanted to enter that experience as best I could.

In modern-day Bethlehem stands the Church of the Nativity, claimed to mark the exact spot of Jesus' birth. That's a bold claim—I'm not sure I could mark the exact spot where my two daughters were born. Sure, I can say Auckland Hospital, but I can't recall which floor we were on, let alone which room.

I remember entering the church of the Nativity and noticing the worn stones on the floor, and finally going down into the small dark room that marks the place of Jesus' birth. A silver star on the ground marks the exact spot of the birth. Tucking my scepticism into my back pocket, I knelt before that spot and said a prayer or two, like so many millions of pilgrims before me.

Does the place really matter? At one level, no. It doesn't matter if this was the place of birth or if it was somewhere altogether different. At another level, the church of the nativity is special because it has helped millions of people connect more deeply with the Christmas story.

Sadly this Christmas most of the celebrations at the Church of the Nativity have been cancelled or significantly scaled back. But hopefully, if all goes to plan in about 10 hours' time, it will be safe enough for a smaller, quieter Midnight Mass to go ahead in Bethlehem, in that special place where the Christmas story began.

When we tell the story of the nativity, when we sing carols and think about angels, shepherds, and magi, we often forget that Jesus was not just born in a physical location but was also born into a political climate. Jesus was born a Jewish person under the occupation of the Roman Empire. Jesus was born a peasant, among people with few rights or freedoms. This was the context in which God chose to enter our human reality. God became one of us in a place of injustice and oppression, because God chooses to enter the places in our world in the greatest need of transformation. This is not simply coincidence.

Two thousand years later, if God were to be born again this night, perhaps the location would be the same, but maybe this time Jesus would be a Palestinian. Or maybe Jesus is born this night in Sudan, where millions are displaced by a conflict the world has largely forgotten. Or in Ukraine. Or even to a family in our city spending this Christmas in their car.

When we place ourselves within the Christmas story, we often make the mistake of thinking that if Jesus were born this night, he would be born into a place like this, among people like us. But that is not how God entered the world. God did not come to a place of safety.

But that does not mean we don't have a place in the story. Maybe we are the ones who must look for signs of God's action from a distance. Maybe we are the ones who must go looking for the places in which Christ is born. Perhaps it is our job to find gifts fit for a newborn king. I'm not simply thinking of material gifts, although that may well be part of what we can give to parts of the world experiencing war, famine, or other forms of deprivation. There are even more basic gifts that some parts of the world long for: safety, shelter, freedom from oppression. These are the gifts that need to be shared throughout our world, because these are the gifts that God asks us to bring to the Prince of Peace.

Have a wonderful, joy-filled Christmas, and may you find the newborn Christ in unlikely places. Amen.