

# ***The Christmas Queue***

***William Loader***

It was a long, wide queue stretching up towards the makeshift tent. You couldn't see the baby – not until you went right in. All you could see were the crowds and the animals: the sheep sitting patiently, safe from danger; the goats pulling impatiently at the few tufts of grass.

Back in the queue the people waited, moving slowly up the hill. Old Mrs Crichton was there, hobbling with her walking stick. "I'm too young for a walking frame", she insists. She's been coming every year. She remembers what he said back then by the well – or, better, what he did: how he met her as a woman; how her race and culture were no barrier; how he offered that real water that quenched her inner thirst.

Zacch is there, too, briefcase in hand. He doesn't climb trees anymore, but he still sees a long way. He sees Gaza. He sees Africa. His generosity goes beyond the horizon. "Did you know that \$10 there goes as far as \$100, sometimes \$1000, here?" he asks. Zacch has a heart for all humanity. He is good news for the poor in person since real salvation came to his house.

His friend still refuses to join him. He's still wanting eternal life and he's still sad. He's still good, but does not *do* much good. He now owns the land here and the makeshift tent – rented for the occasion. Next year he is planning an entry fee. He has filled his emptiness with great wealth. His tree has its roots stretching to every continent, impoverishing every soil. And all the time he keeps meeting Zacch, who keeps planting new trees and developing new resources and sharing new wealth.

And *she* is there – the one they wanted to stone. And the one with the massage oil. They stick together because they know they are embarrassing. They know he will welcome them, but they know that many who claim him as their hero will not. So they try to be unobtrusive and walk with the people who are different in their ways, their culture, their gender, their origins.

Pilate is not in the queue. He's doing a TV interview, explaining about collateral damage and the importance of security – and, yes, acknowledging that sometimes innocent people get killed, but that he is part of a system that brought peace and stability to the Middle East – and not many succeed in that. A baby is, after all, only a baby.

Peter looks very awkward. He's all dressed up, carrying a shepherd's staff made of gold, but looking like a medieval painting come to life. Underneath he's itching to go fishing again. But

he wants to be here. The crows of the roosters set him going and he remembers the eyes that spoke truth – and reconciliation. On stage he wants the company to perform and celebrate life and hope.

Children are there, with their parents, but also running in circles, playing and chatting to one another as the long queue inches forward. Most no longer remember the time he welcomed them into his arms and refused to believe that children were unimportant and didn't matter. Some have known joy, some, pain and abuse. There will be a place for them in the tent – always.

John the Baptist is there, complaining, carrying a quiver full of warning signs: Stop hating Jews in Jesus' name! Stop turning the good news into a promise of more luxury for the rich! Stop imagining ecstasy is love! Stop perverting the gospel into selfish consumerism and a promise of real estate in another world! Stop living richly at the expense of others! Stop pretending you can waste the world's resources and not destroy it! Stop your wars, your greed, your racism, your sexism, your making yourself great by making others small!

A little girl leads me by the hand as I approach the fold of the tent. "You have to be quiet," she said, "and close your eyes." I closed my eyes and saw before me a great mountain. And there ... were people gathered from every nation and every people. Near the summit on a wide plateau I saw a wide table. Everyone had a place. Everyone could see. And there at one moment was a baby, at another an adult hand stretched out, offering bread and wine. And I heard a voice saying: "And you, do you want the love that changes the world?" Without saying a word, I reached out my hand in response, took the bread, received the wine – and I knew. I knew that here was light and life and hope for me and for our world.

The little girl led me further and whispered: "Open your eyes". When I looked, the crowds had gone. I was standing in a garden. "This is your garden," she said. "Make the flowers grow! Let the trees grow tall! Attend to the weeds. Make sure there are paths and places to sit and be still. Be sure the birds will come and make their nests here in the branches. And this will be a holy place for all."

I have made the journey and will make it again. The baby cries in the cries of all people. The makeshift tent invites me to care. And I know there can be hope and peace. And I will learn to love and care for the garden and all its people.

[Home Page](#)