

The Innkeeper at Bethlehem

A Christmas Tale

Our tale begins with an Innkeeper at Bethlehem. His name was barely known outside of the dusty town limits, but it *was* known in Heaven, as all such things *are*. On the road on this fateful day, a nondescript couple, amid the throng of many such couples, were sent by Heaven to his Inn, to find themselves lodgings for the night.

He was an overly friendly man, ever mindful of the need to have bodies reclining on beds, so he could have enough coins to make ends meet. But there had been many times when he barely had two coins to rub together, and he had to stretch the ends almost to breaking, but even then, they couldn't quite meet. Fortunately, today was no such day.

Our Innkeeper was every inch the traveller's friend, with an ear always open for a good tale, which he could repeat for the amusement of his guests. His arms were short and stubby, his body barrel-round and wobbly as a man standing on ice, as his legs shuffled rather than walked, after a lifetime of pottering around in the Inn.

Perched atop this body was a small round head, sparsely populated with brittle grey hair, and a short unkempt greying beard. Below small black eyes, he wore a permanent half-smile, which made him appear jovial to the glance, but, when he opened his mouth of yellowing teeth, his language was terse, and blunt. This made his patrons feel that they had done something to upset him, and consequently, they would avoid conversing with him whenever possible, and avoid his gaze *always*.

The book of Luke tells us, '*There was no room at the Inn.*' Our Innkeeper friend had spent the whole day cramming more-and-more mattresses into every nook and cranny he could find, as the torrent of arriving travellers flowed to his door, and he answered the almost unending bout of knocking with, "Yes, of course, come in." Every bed was filled, there were mattresses laid the whole length of the hall, and every other unused space had a mattress squeezed into it, with a person, a couple, or even a whole family sitting, or lying on it. Some were asleep already, after the arduous journey home, from remote parts of the Empire. But finally, he had to admit, that he was overflowing with guests, and he had to reluctantly say, "Enough," as he turned on the NO VACANCY sign, before quickly closing the door.

But, all afternoon, it was KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK...KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK...KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK, and our Innkeeper friend regrettably, had to turn people away. "There's no room." "Sorry, no we're full." "No, I haven't." "No, I can't, I've even given up my own bed." "No, not even one more person, sorry."

So, our Innkeeper friend retired to his office, weary, but content with his lot today, more contented than he could ever remember feeling before. He would sleep there,

with his coin purse tucked tightly inside his robe. He didn't mind the hustle and bustle, of the day at all, because he had never made so much money in all his years at the Inn, and he had to ruefully admit, that he had those *cursed* Romans to thank for it.

He was slowly, but methodically, counting the untidy pile of coins, which were spread across his table, while imagining how it could be spent. He would do the old place up a bit, and he could travel! He could see Rome itself. Athens? Spain? Gaul? All those places had only been stories to him before, but now, he could actually afford to go and visit them for himself. He'd be the talk of the town, and everyone would respect Him. They would ask him about those far off places, the way he himself, was asking his guests about them today. Where would he start? Rome maybe? By boat? He had never been in a boat before, and was pondering what it would be like to float on water, when his thoughts were interrupted by a faint zzzzzz, which caught his attention momentarily, but he quickly went back to his counting again. He had just reached a satisfyingly large number in shekels, when, there it was again, that annoying zzzzzz. He realised it was the buzzer on the counter in Reception.

"Ahh," he grunted, pretending he didn't hear it. Where was he? That's right, a boat journey to Rome. Maybe he could see Sicily on the way? He could too...but, there it was again, zzzzzz. "Go away," he mumbled to himself, trying not to interrupt his day-dream, and lose count of his coins. But there it was, yet *again*, zzzzzz. "Hmm," he grumbled, and angrily got up from his desk.

"Do you have a room?" It was a middle-aged man, looking travel-weary, in crumpled dust-stained garments, with his young wife, who was obviously very pregnant, and standing shyly, half hidden, behind her husband. Our Innkeeper's mind was still swirling with thoughts of Rome, Greece, and Sicily, and he didn't have time for this. He hung his head and muttered something unintelligible, then asked the man bluntly, "Can you read?" "Yes," Joseph replied, "I can." "Good," the Innkeeper grunted, "Then go outside, and read the sign on the roof," he blurted out, pointing upwards. Joseph went out into the darkness, and gazed up to where a sign was flashing on the roof, 'NO VACANCY...NO VACANCY...NO VACANCY...' He returned inside. "I hoped you could *find* room....Mary's going to have a baby tonight." "Well, I can't," the Innkeeper replied gruffly, desperate to return to his unguarded cash, and his swelling plans, "So, go away and bother someone else...goodnight!"

Joseph and Mary stepped out into the night, where they were quickly swallowed up by the inky gloom; and our Innkeeper friend returned to his pile of coins, and the bustling metropolis of Rome, where his imagination was already visiting the Coliseum.

But, our friend did not know, and maybe never *will* know, that he had just turned away the Saviour of Mankind, into the night. The greatest event in history could have taken place in *his* Inn, but he was unaware of that. The whole world was unaware of what was taking place, because everyone was caught up in the bustle of returning to their birthplaces, to be counted in the census; and they were more interested in

hearing the latest gossip from returning relatives, than in knowing what God was doing on that eventful night.

The Bible tells us Joseph was a *'just man,'* meaning he was a good man. A good husband. A good father. A good friend to have. And, if he couldn't find a room for himself, and Mary, he would at least find a stable, and fodder, for his faithful donkey, which had carried Mary along the dusty winding trail, all the way from Nazareth. So, he located a stable, and the stable keeper was only too happy, to make room for one more donkey. And there, among the litter at the donkey's feet, Mary lay down to rest, as the first faint pains stabbed suddenly, within her swollen belly. This world could make room for a donkey to rest, but it could not make room for its Saviour to be born.

When our Lord and Saviour came to this earth, to walk among us veiled in a robe of flesh, we never rolled out the red carpet to welcome Him. Isaiah prophesied that, *'He (Jesus) would be despised and rejected of men. A man of sorrows, acquainted with grief,'* and it was that way from the very beginning. He was our Saviour, and Redeemer, who stepped down from Heaven to earth, to wear a robe of flesh among us, yet we never made any announcement of His coming.

So, as Luke records, the Angel of the Lord came to shepherds sitting on a hillside with their flocks. And the Glory of the Lord shone round about them. And the Angel said, *"Fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy; for unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; you shall find the Babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in a manger. And suddenly, there was with the Angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."*

Why did the Angel announce the birth of Jesus to shepherds? Why didn't he announce it to the High Priest, and the religious leaders in the Temple at Jerusalem? Who better to attend the birth of a lamb, than Shepherds. So, at the birth of the Lamb of God, shepherds were there to see He was safely delivered into this world.

Isaiah prophesied, *'For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon His shoulder: and His Name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.'* But even though Jesus was the Mighty God, He didn't come here at the head of an army of Angels. He told His disciples, *"He who would be the greatest among you, let him be the servant of all,"* because that's what He did. As He said, *"I am among you as one who serves."* And even though He owns all the riches of the universe, He didn't come here a wealthy man.

He had to borrow a womb to grow in.

He had to borrow a stable to be born in.

He had to borrow a manger, (an animal's feeding trough) to sleep in.

He had to borrow Peter's boat, to preach from.

Foxes had holes, birds had nests, but He didn't have anywhere to lay His head. When He was crucified, He had to borrow a grave, to be buried in. And He felt no shame, in any of that.

John tells us that He (Jesus) *'was in the world, and the world was made by Him, but the world knew Him not.'* In the Temple, God was hidden behind a curtain in the Holy of Holies. But in Jesus Christ, God was hidden behind a veil of flesh; though He never felt the need to prove to the world who He was.

Yet, when there was a storm on the sea of Galilee, and He commanded the storm to cease; the wind and the waves obeyed their Maker, and *'there was a great calm.'* That proved who He was.

When Lazarus had been dead in the grave for four days, and His Creator (Jesus) commanded, *"Lazarus, come forth."* Death released its grip on him, and returned him to life; and that proved who He was.

When He took five loaves of bread, and two fish, and fed more than ten thousand people with them, that proved who He was.

And yet, He could put on a tee shirt, and a pair of jeans, and sandals, and walk down the street today; and I could pass Him, and not even know, that I'd just shared the footpath with the Almighty God. He acts with humility, because He loves humility. As we are told in the book of James, *'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'*

The reason Angels were sent to announce His birth, was because Heaven was more interested in the things going on, on this earth, than Mankind was. As Luke records, when Jesus was praying, Moses and Elijah appeared to Him, and, *'They spoke to Him of His decease (crucifixion) which He should accomplish at Jerusalem.'* Even though it was our redemption He was being crucified for, Heaven sent Moses and Elijah to speak to Him about it.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus was praying, preparing Himself for the crucifixion, the Disciples were sleeping, and the rest of the city were preparing for the Passover, while He was sweating, *'great drops of blood.'* But, the Bible records how, *'An Angel from Heaven appeared to Him, strengthening Him.'*

Nothing has changed from that day to this. We still get caught up in the hustle-bustle of life, and miss what Heaven is doing on earth today. In the beginning of John's Gospel, we are told how, *'He came unto His own (Israel) and His own received Him not. But, as many as received Him, to them gave He power, to become the sons (and daughters) of God.'*

That's what the birth in the stable was about. Emmanuel, God with us. God, stepping into a body of earthly flesh and blood, to be crucified for my sins, and your sins. And, to anyone who receives Him today, to them He still gives the power, to become a son, or a daughter, of Almighty God.

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Brother Kevin
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