

No Room

It was during the time of the census that a strange thing happened. I say 'strange', but when I tell you about it, perhaps you will think that each little part of the story seems quite ordinary. And that is mostly true. But it's when you put together all these 'ordinary' things that the whole thing becomes extraordinary.

I had never known a busier time than those days of the census. Our little town is quite quiet most of the time. We get passing trade of course, and when there is a festival on in the city we get pilgrims passing through, but as we are only 5 miles to the south, most press on and get lodgings there, although if it is particularly busy, some lodge here and travel up and back.

But there was no choice at the time of the census. Everyone had to go to their home town to register for taxation purposes. I never found out if this business of going to your home town was by decree of the Emperor, or just a local arrangement insisted on by Kurinios the Governor of Syria or by our own King Herod. Whatever... I didn't care what the reason was. All I knew was that it was the best business I'd done for a long time.

You see, I was in the hospitality business—a nice little tavern it was too, with several guest rooms. My

daughter and her man run it now. The sign says “The House of Bread” in Greek. A good name for an inn. And a nice little pun, because the name of our town means “House of Bread” in Hebrew—Bethlehem.

Of course, some of the religious people were not happy with this census business. They’re always not happy with something! They talked about the time when our own King David got into trouble with God for counting the people. David came from this very town. There are even some local people who claim to be descended from David, but David lived a long time ago, and everyone would like to be connected to him—not just because he was our greatest king, but because our prophets are full of references to a descendent of David who will restore David’s kingdom.

Some people were always talking about a new King of the Jews, but they had to talk quietly, because we already had a king—King Herod! And he did not take kindly to any talk of rebellion. He even had members of his own family executed—Mariamne, one of his wives, and her two sons, because she was descended from the previous dynasty, from Judas the Hammer who had freed us from Greek rule. Anyway I’ve heard that even the Emperor joked “It’s better to be one of Herod’s pigs than his son!”

I'm telling you all this because it is not unrelated to the strange thing that happened at that census, as you will see.

That day started the same as any other day during the census—the usual round of providing meals for our guests, tidying up afterwards, and dealing with the usual round of complaints—particularly from the government officials here for the census. I think they were annoyed they weren't being put up in a more high class establishment in Jerusalem. My nice little place wasn't good enough for them! Anyway they couldn't have found another space in the whole of Bethlehem. The town was heaving. My place was bursting at the seams. I couldn't have fitted another bed anywhere.

And it was that evening when they turned up. A young couple out of Galilee. Well, she was very young, not much more than a girl really. He was a bit older—a carpenter from Nazareth. I could see right away why they had arrived late. She was heavily pregnant. It's 80 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem—and that's by the direct route. As good Jews, they might have avoided the land of the Samaritans. In any case, the journey took days longer than they had anticipated, and they were late. Too late to find any place anywhere in Bethlehem.

They looked really disappointed when I explained we were completely full up. I could see the girl was trying hard not to cry. They'd been travelling all day

and were dog tired. I asked if they didn't have family or friends in Bethlehem who would put them up. They looked at each other and the man shook his head. It seemed like there was a story to tell there, but he wasn't telling it!

That's when he looked at me very seriously and said, "Look, my wife is about to give birth, and it is really important that he is born in Bethlehem, more important that you could know. Is there nowhere we can just have shelter and she can lie down?"

Something about his manner impressed me greatly. It was only later it struck me that he spoke of the child as male. How could he have known?

"I'll tell you what I'll do", I said, "I'll go up and see if any of the guests would be willing to give up their room for you." They were very grateful, but I had little hope. It turned out my expectations were right. I didn't expect the government officials to give up their rooms, but not even the religious people would budge. It wasn't until later that it dawned on me I was just as bad. I didn't give up my room either! But as I went back down to see the young couple, a plan had formed in my mind.

"It's not ideal", I said, "But there's the stable—down below here—where we can put your donkey. There are a lot of beasts in just now. Mainly donkeys and camels, and a couple of horses belonging to the

officials too. But I'm sure there's still a spare stall, and my wife can make it snug. What do you say?"

I thought they might have turned their noses up at that, or accepted reluctantly. In fact, they were delighted! The young girl's face lit up, and my wife and I soon had them installed (if you'll excuse the pun!) in a warm corner of the stable.

It was very soon after that, that the girl went into labour. My wife assisted her and we men were put outside. It was then I got into conversation with the father. It was hard going at first. He was a bit cagey, and I had to do most of the talking. But he was pacing up and down nervously, and after a little while, he opened up. His name was Joseph and his wife's name was Mary. Although he was a carpenter from up north in Galilee, his family originally came from Bethlehem.

I asked him what family he belonged to. He paused and gave me a searching look. He said, "I know you will find this hard to believe, but I can trace my family line right back to King David, and so can my wife Mary." Something about the way he said it made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

Then I said, "When you spoke of the unborn child a while ago, you called him 'he'. And it didn't sound like wishful thinking; you said it like you knew." He looked at me hard again, and just said, "Yes, I know." "But how?" I asked, "How can you know?"

He half-smiled and said, "I know you'll laugh. But I had a dream. And not any old dream. An angel of God spoke to me and said Mary was going to have a son, a special son. He even told me his name. He is to be called Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

I had no time to say all the things that came into my head then, because we heard Mary cry out and, and very shortly after that we heard the unmistakable cry of a new-born baby. It was all I could do to keep Joseph from rushing in. But in a few minutes my wife came out and said he could go in. I went too, and I don't know what I expected to see, but there he was—just an ordinary little baby in his mother's arms making little crying sounds. Mary was tired, of course, but she looked radiant. She was so proud of her new son. She said, "This is the Son of David, and he's called Jesus!"

That sent a shiver down my spine, and I said, "Better be careful who you say that to! You wouldn't want King Herod hearing there was a rival king!"

Mary looked at me and said in a very clear strong voice, "The Lord brings down rulers from their thrones and lifts up the humble. He fills the hungry with good things, but sends the rich away empty."

I was about to remonstrate, but my wife shooed me away and told me the baby would need a cot after he'd

been fed! Where was I to find a cot in the middle of the night?! Then I had an idea. One of the wooden feeding troughs would be about the right size. Joseph got his tools (he was a joiner after all) and removed it from the wall and then we padded it with hay. By this time the baby had been fed and Mary and my wife had wrapped him up warmly. Then they laid him in the manger. He seemed happy and was soon fast asleep. My wife and I then withdrew. It gave me a strange pang looking at the little family as they settled down for the night in our stable.

We went to bed, but I couldn't settle. All the things I'd heard were going round in my head. But eventually I fell into a deep sleep, and kings and babies and soldiers were chasing each other round my dreams. Suddenly I jerked awake. Someone was hammering at the door. I jumped out of bed. I must have slept in. But no, it was still pitch dark!

I stumbled downstairs, half expecting to see soldiers looking for a baby. But when I opened the door, it couldn't have been more different. A bunch of shepherds! And they looked as if they were straight off the hills. Shepherds don't come into town much, and when they do, you'd better lock up your houses and shops—and your daughters too!

I glowered suspiciously at them and asked, "What do you want?"

They seemed excited and nervous, but the oldest one took off his hat and spoke most respectfully.

“Ah, um, well you see, we were wondering if you’ve had a baby?”

When he saw the look of consternation on my face, he hastily added, “Well, not you personally, of course, but someone in the inn? Because if so we have an important message about him—but only if it’s the right baby.”

I was so flabbergasted I just managed to gasp, “How will you know if it’s the right baby?”

“Oh that’s easy”, he said, “He’ll be wrapped up warmly but lying in a manger!”

Well, that sent a shiver up my spine all right! And I asked them how they knew all this. At that they got even more excited and demanded to see the baby first and then they would tell all.

I could see that I would get no more sleep that night unless I agreed, so I went to ask Joseph if it was all right. They were awake, the baby was being fed again, and Joseph said it was fine.

At first the shepherds just kept saying to themselves, “Look it’s just like we were told. It’s just like he said.” I was getting a bit exasperated by this time and I asked, “Who said?”

Then it all came tumbling out. They kept interrupting each other and speaking over each other, But this is the gist of what they said.

“We were out in the hills looking after our sheep. It was pitch dark. Our fire had burned low. When suddenly there was a bright light all around us, and in the middle of it, a heavenly messenger, an angel. We were terrified, but he said ‘Don’t be afraid! I’m bringing great joyful good news for all the people! A Saviour, who is Christ the Lord, has been born for you in David’s town this very night.’

“Then he told us, ‘This is the sign for you: you will find him warmly wrapped up but lying in a manger!’ So that’s why we knew what to look for!

“Then a whole host of angels like a heavenly army appeared praising God: ‘Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.’

“When the angels had all disappeared up into the sky, we said, ‘Let’s go to Bethlehem. Let’s see this thing that’s happened, that the Lord has told us about.’ And here we are! And it’s just like he said! So it’s all true! This baby is the promised Son of David. He is the true king. He will set things to right. We must tell everyone!”

Joseph and Mary were amazed and delighted, and I could feel the same excitement myself, but I was

beginning to feel worried about what the shepherds might say that might fall on the wrong ears. So I tried to caution them before they left. I don't think it did much good, as I found out afterwards they spread the word, but thankfully to people who could be trusted to keep it secret.

Joseph and Mary and the baby didn't stay long at my place. Once the excitement of the census had passed, Joseph managed to find a place for them in the town, I think with some far out relative of his.

But before they left, we talked over all that had happened. By this time they trusted me and they confided more in me. We were talking about their special child, and I said to Joseph, "You must be very proud to be his father."

He smiled, kind of sadly I thought, and said, "But I'm not his father." When he saw the look of horror on my face, he added, "Don't get me wrong, Mary has not been unfaithful to me, and I will be a father to him, but..." and here he hesitated. "But no man is his father. His Father is God. Mary conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, and the angel Gabriel told her that her child would be called the Son of God!"

Nothing of all the wonders I had heard prepared me for this! I was shaken to the core of my being. "If that is true," I said slowly, "Then that child, lying there

in your wife's arms, is Immanuel (God With Us). He is a divine Person!"

They both nodded slowly, "Yes, it's difficult to get used to. We are struggling to adjust. He looks so ordinary."

I suddenly felt ashamed. I blurted out, "I'm sorry. I'm so ashamed. You came to me and I nearly turned you away. I had no room for you—no room for him. I put you in the stable and I put him in a manger!"

Mary smiled and said, "Don't blame yourself. How could you know? And anyway it was meant to be. You heard what the shepherds said: He was to be found in a manger. He is the Son of God, and is to be a great king, but I think he will be a different kind of king. He has come amongst the poor and the oppressed, and so it was fitting that he should be born in a stable and laid in a manger."

Her words and gracious attitude comforted me greatly, but it was not until Joseph spoke that the burden was lifted. He just said, "Remember he has come to save his people from their sins. And we are all sinners."

After they moved, I didn't see them very much, and with one thing or another time passed round pretty quickly. The next I heard they were gone. They left in a hurry in the middle of the night. No one knew where.

But very soon Bethlehem had something else to worry about—something far worse. Suddenly hundreds of soldiers appeared and started going systematically from house to house and killing every male infant! It was like my worst nightmare that night the shepherds came. Only this was real!

The truth came out in the end. Seemingly VIPs came from the East to Jerusalem asking to see the one who was born King of the Jews! They were astronomers and had seen his star in the East. They might have had more sense than to go to Jerusalem. For there already was a king of the Jews there—King Herod! But Herod was crafty. He got the religious leaders to tell him where this Son of David was to be born. They consulted the old scrolls and told him it would be Bethlehem. Then he told the stargazers to go and search and then return to tell him all about it. Seemingly they came and found Jesus, but they didn't go back to Herod. This enraged him, and he sent the soldiers to make sure there would be no rival King of the Jews.

No room in the inn. No room in Bethlehem. No room in the whole of Israel, and if Herod had his way no room in the whole world. But he's still out there somewhere, on the run, in hiding, in the shadows. But something tells me his kingdom will come, and it will outlast Herod's and all the kingdoms of this world.

The only question is: have we got room for him?

Luke 2