

AFC
Christmas Day 2017

An Innkeeper's Tale

It's been quite a night here in King David Street.

Bethlehem isn't a big place. We are really a dormitory town to Jerusalem. Yet this year the month of Nisan has been bedlam.

You see the Romans (if they hadn't got better things to do) ordered a census and everyone has had to go back to their home town to register.

Esther and I are fine. We were born here and have been running this Inn all our married life. And to be truthful this census has been great for business.

But the last few days have actually run us into the ground. Every rooms been taken, but often only for the one night. You should see the washing – it's never ending.

Still, when it's all over I've promised Esther I'll take her for a long weekend to the seaside at Joppa, one of our favourite places.

But I still can't get my head round last night. It was early evening when this young couple tried booking in. They looked utterly exhausted and I could see she was near her time. I'd have loved to have been more accommodating but we've only got four rooms to let and everyone had paid up front and gone for an early

afternoon check in.

I was just about to turn this young couple away – of course I'd recommend some other place to them, when Esther came back from shopping and told me she'd heard every room in town had been booked out by mid-afternoon.

Now, Esther's what you call the mothering kind. Our kids are grown up now but she acts as the local midwife and everyone loves Esther.

So, of course, she twisted my arm and we let this young couple have the storage room just above the stable. It's warm but we've never let it out before and I've no idea what would be its going rate!

Esther made them comfortable. But then Joseph (that was his name – he had a Bethlehem accent of course, but he said all his relatives had moved away from town years ago just after he took a job up north, place called Nazareth – I've never heard of it!), banged on the inn door around midnight. Poor guy, he was in such a state, he looked terrified.

Esther took charge for the rest of the night. I went over once and called up to the room above the stable to asked if she needed extra oil lamps, but she said no, the stable seemed unusually bright and sure enough as I looked up into the night sky the stars seemed to me to be brighter than I'd ever seen them before.

By about 5am as dawn was breaking I heard a baby's cry and took over some bread, olives and pomegranate juice.

Joseph came down and had a bite to eat alongside the tethered donkeys and the few sheep, goats and hens we keep there.

His eyes were watery and he couldn't stop smiling.

I said I needed to get back to the main house but he insisted I go up and see Mary. But by now she was actually asleep. Esther was holding the baby and Joseph told me he was to be called Yesuha – that's a variant for us of the name Joshua, meaning deliverer. It's a good name, some of my own family have it too.

This all seemed so ordinary and yet a bit different. That starlight and then as the sun started to rise a group of shepherd friends of mine, Ben, Samuel and Jacob turn up. They regularly drink here and said they had been told about the birth of Yesuha. I asked how they knew and they just grinned at me in a slightly gormless way and said – 'we just know' and then winked at each other.

Now Ben, Sam and Jake are just regular shepherd mates of mine so I was amazed that these three guys go up to the stable loft as quiet as Synagogue mice and spend ten minutes admiring Yesuha and congratulating this young couple – a conversation that seemed to go so deep even though they had just met – it's as if my three mates and Mary and Joseph had known each other for years and something, some hope, some truth maybe bound them together.

As these three guys came down from there I saw them in a different light. After a long night shift on the hills they left our stable as if they were walking on air!

By mid-morning it had all quietened down.

The three in the stable loft were asleep, as was Esther up in our room.

I started to open up for the lunchtime regulars and found myself inexplicably thrilled about all that had gone on the night before. As if I had been part of a story that was important.

Think of that, Esther and I, just making a living with our little Inn on the corner of King David Street – part of someone's bigger story.

Seemed important.

Seemed special.

Seemed like something worth celebrating.

Oh well, need to get back to work. I wonder what I should charge them for the stable loft? Perhaps I'll give it to them as a present – never know it might start a tradition!

Ian Gree, Amersham, 18th December 2017