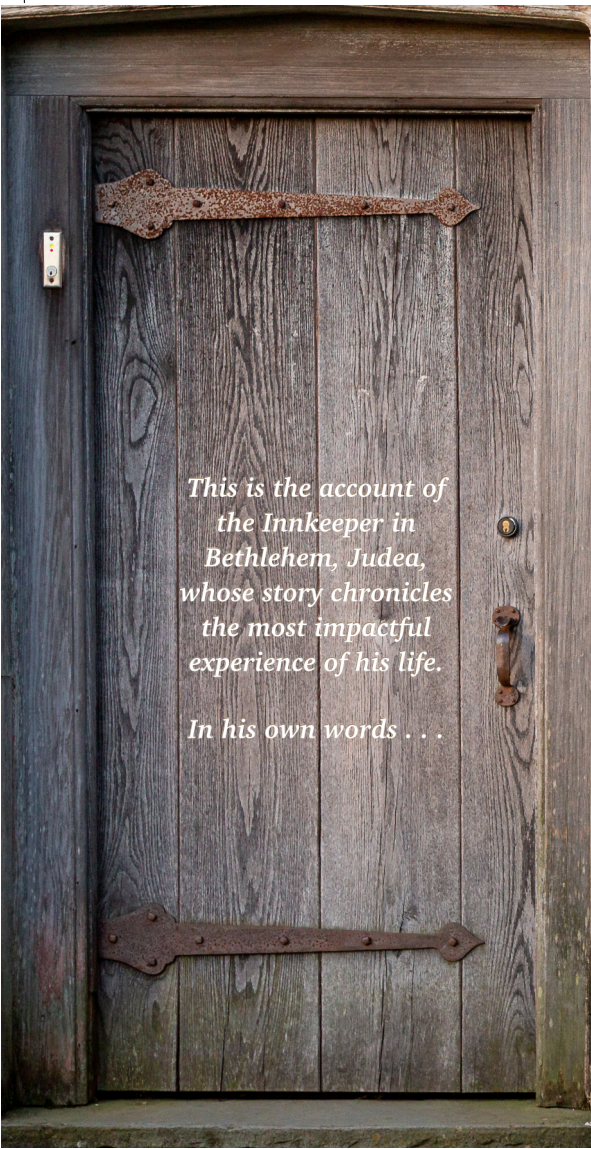


THE *Innkeeper's* STORY

Sharon Platt-McDonald





*This is the account of
the Innkeeper in
Bethlehem, Judea,
whose story chronicles
the most impactful
experience of his life.*

In his own words . . .



It was a full house.

Every available space was occupied. More importantly, the best and most expensive rooms were now occupied, which would certainly be a financial boost – at last.

The entire property now teeming with fee-paying guests meant that we had to use the spare rooms usually reserved for visiting family members. We had even brought in extra camp beds to facilitate the larger-than-expected client families that had currently booked to stay



due to the latest government announcement. Well, the decree of the Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus, to be exact. People were flocking to Bethlehem, Judea, in order to register their families for the census.

I thought of what I would do with the extra money that these – how should I put it? – unexpected bookings would bring, and realised with a sense of smug satisfaction that I would be financially stable for a good while to come.

And why shouldn't I feel smug? Previously, business had been rather slow, but since the taxation announcement (which had certainly caused tremendous political upheaval) our somewhat quiet town was

now bustling with activity and noise. I'm usually a quiet type of person, but anything that brought in money, I could put up with – well, almost anything.

It was well into the evening when I heard the distinct, almost impatient knocking at the door. Irritated, I wondered whether the sign clearly displayed as **'FULL'** (אין מקום) was being ignored.

Or maybe it was more likely foreigners, who couldn't speak Aramaic and read the word written in large lettering in plain sight! Well, it certainly wouldn't have been locals knocking at this undignified hour.

I gathered my robe around me and began making my way towards the door. The knocking started again, more desperate-sounding this time. *Perhaps it's an emergency*, I thought.



Well, I certainly would not be able to help if that was the case. 'Hang on! hang on! Just a moment, please!' I responded with irritation, a little louder than I had meant to. I just couldn't stand to be hurried, and at this time of night!

Opening the door cautiously, I extended my head just enough for my face to be visible while keeping my body protectively behind the door. Well, it could be anybody out there. You had to be careful nowadays. Who knows who could be on the other side. Opportunists? Robbers, maybe? Perish the thought!

As I adjusted my vision to the dim lighting outside, it was not what I expected to see. My heart gave a little tug as I took in the sight. From what I could see, there was a very heavily pregnant woman on a donkey, cradling her abdomen delicately, looking quite uncomfortable. The gentleman standing



beside her appeared rather anxious and quite unsure of himself. They looked at me desperately with pleading eyes. I noted the few bundles that accompanied them. Meagre possessions, no doubt.

The donkey looked as weary as the travellers. How far had these people come?

What a persistent man! OK, to be fair, he was obviously concerned for his wife. Well, I do hope they were married! Anyway, there was no place





for them here. The sign on the door was still correct, **'FULL'** (אין מקום). In fact, full to capacity and overflowing.

I was just about to turn them away when I gave the matter more consideration. Firstly, if I let them go, that could pose a risk. I wouldn't want to be known as the proprietor who caused the poor woman to go into labour in the streets. That wouldn't do any good for my reputation, or the inn's ratings for that matter.

I did feel sorry for them. The poor woman . . . and the man was clearly looking more defeated by the second. Even the poor donkey looked as though it needed help!

Where could I put them in an already overflowing house? There was no other available space – no other place, except for the barn out the back! Aha! That was still space belonging to the inn, so I would definitely have to charge them a little something for the space.

They could have the hay for a place to sleep, which would be easier than sleeping on the cold floor. Hay had gone up in price recently (due to the dry season), and by the look of that tired donkey, that beast could well eat up all the straw in sight! Now, let me think, did I have any extra stock of hay? . . .



The gentleman, clearly impatient with my musings, coughed nervously, perhaps to get my attention. I cleared my throat and took a moment to present the option I was about to offer.

‘Well, we are completely full,’ I began, pointing to the sign on the door. ‘However, there is a space outside . . . I mean towards the back, in the barn. It’s not in the best of shape, mind you. I was hoping to renovate it at some point, but I’m afraid that’s all I have. With it being so late, and all the other inns full as well – I know that, because I checked them earlier – my barn is the best option.’

Catching my breath, and pausing to let the information sink in, I hoped I had done enough explaining to convince them to take up the option – the only option in Bethlehem. If they had to opt for a barnyard residence, it might as well be mine.

The couple exchanged a quick glance, and the man nodded his approval. ‘Great, let me take you round,’ I responded, perhaps a little brighter than I had intended. ‘Oh, just one moment,’ I said quickly, ‘I need to wear an extra layer to keep out the chill of the night air.’

As I hurried back along the hallway, I picked out a casual tunic and a heavy old cloak to



ensure adequate warmth. As I did so, I thought it might be good to bring a couple of the other cloaks for the travellers. These I could include as optional extras in the final bill. Also, they could incur a charge if they got soiled.

I led them out to the barnyard, to this extra 'room' – not more than a cattle stall really. I was glad that I had swept the courtyard earlier. Holding up the brightly lit copper lamp (bargain purchase at the thrift store), the light glistened on the cobbled stone path, illuminating our steps.

I looked up instinctively and realised that somehow the sky appeared somewhat more illuminated tonight. Strange. There appeared to

be a star that stood out distinctly, which had an alluring glare to it: dazzling, even. Couldn't remember ever seeing something like that before. Anyway, no time to ponder astronomy: I had guests to settle.

Going ahead of the couple some distance, I quickly entered the barn and bustled around, trying to tidy things up, dimming the lamplight slightly to avert closer inspection of the sparse surroundings.

Realising how chilly the night air was, I decided to go back and get a few extra cloaks and a couple of blankets. Now, that would be a small extra charge – could they afford it?

On my return, the night sky appeared even brighter; I hardly required the use of the lamp. Oh well, at least the light brightened the atmosphere for the weary travellers.



I presented the cloaks and blankets, which they accepted gratefully. Ensuring that that they were comfortable enough, I bade them goodnight and left the barn.

Taking one last look back at the couple, I saw they looked even more exhausted, slowly attempting to settle into this makeshift lodging. I noted that the woman clutched her stomach and almost crumpled onto the straw, her face contorted with pain. The man gently cushioned her descent, cradling her in his arms.

What if she was in the early stages of labour? My mind raced ahead, imagining what a barn birth would be like. I would have to alert the servants in the morning to prepare, just in case we were not able to get hold of a local midwife. The servants had assisted with many cattle births in this very barn, but a child would certainly be different, and risky.

I secretly hoped the couple would be able to register at the census before the child came; then at least that would avert a barn crisis, which would certainly add to the cost of their stay!

I made my way back to the warmth of the inn, realising the comfort it provided. Feeling a pang of pity for the family in the barn, I resolved to be more grateful for the life I had.

At last, sinking into my ample bedding, too tired to do the nightly review of funds required for the day, I drifted off into a satisfying sleep.

I awoke with a start. What was that noise? More interruptions to a good night's sleep! How irritating! There they were again –

raised voices. They appeared to be coming from the barn area. Sounded like a rabble to me! Oh dear . . . had to be more foreigners! No one from around here would be conversing in such raised tones at this time of night, as if it were broad daylight! What was wrong with people?

No finesse at all!

Or maybe it was undesirables seeking to make trouble! Or, worse still, I wondered if anyone had seen me accommodating the strangers as I ushered them to the barn earlier on. Perhaps they had been followed? Perish the thought!



I reached under the bed for the heavy rod I kept for emergencies – to defend myself, of course, if necessary. Better to be armed and prepared than to be caught unawares. I slowly crept outside, holding the rod in front of me and dimming the lamp to avoid drawing attention.

The voices lulled momentarily. Was that the cry of a baby I heard? Had the woman delivered the child already? Ugh, too much excitement for one night!

There was a smell of something I couldn't quite place, but which was familiar. Where had I smelt that scent before? Unpleasant as it was, perhaps, at the sheep market. Shepherds! Yes, rabble indeed. And what were so many of them doing congregating in the barn? My barn, on my property. They had no right to be here – uninvited, and no fees discussed! Opportunistic! (Tut!)






I approached the stable to find an unexpected sight. Clearly, they were shepherds by their clothing and scent, but it was their reverent posture that captured my attention, as I watched their kneeling form and bowed heads. It was a scene of worship – the sound of prayers and praise being offered. But why were they worshipping here, and to whom were they paying homage?

I dared not interrupt. Their faces were aglow with an unnatural light. It was as if their countenance were illuminated from an external source. In fact, it appeared as though the light that illuminated the night sky was shining through into the barn! Incredible! What was occurring here felt quite extraordinary. They appeared rapt in their adoration, as they lifted their heads and looked towards the feeding trough.

Then I saw the child.





Lying in a bed of hay, a makeshift manger, at the feeding place of cattle, was the newly born infant.

Even now, it's difficult to describe what I felt as I caught sight of the baby wrapped in scraps of cloth.

Obviously, the mother had anticipated a possible birth away from home, but the meagre cladding hardly appeared sufficient. Oh, the wonder in the parents' eyes as they gazed at this new life! My heart tugged for the second time.

I'm not sure how long I stood there, mouth agape, observing the scene. The shepherds again bowed low with their faces to the ground, in a posture of reverence. Why were they worshipping? Who were these strangers to whom

they paid homage? Was it the parents or the child? And why did it feel so momentous, as if this extraordinary moment would be long remembered?

There was a sense that its significance would somehow be a turning point in my life, although at that precise moment I didn't know what it was.

'Come and see our son,' the mother requested, punctuating my thoughts and the somewhat sacred atmosphere.

Hesitantly I stepped forward, as the father beckoned me closer.

'By the way, we are Mary and Joseph,' he said.

Finding my voice, I tentatively enquired, 'What have you called the child?' Then I suddenly remembered that, with some customs, children were named several days after a birth.

'Jesus,' responded Mary.

'Jesus?' I asked quizzically.

Jesus

Then, before I could get a response, the shepherds interrupted with a report of such magnitude that I can only describe it as a moment that would become significantly historic.

The shepherds unveiled their dramatic experience. They reported the detailed account of the heavenly hosts that had visited them, out on the hillside that night, with the declaration that the Christ child was born!

The incredible narrative ended with a report of the angels' spontaneous outburst of singing –



*'Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth, peace,
goodwill toward men.'*

It was the song of angels! Such beauty, richness, pathos and power, a message of hope and deliverance – the gift of God to the world!

Before I realised what I was doing, my knees hit the floor, and there, in that sacred space, I too began to worship.

I am not sure how long we remained in that position, all of us giving thanks to God for the promised Saviour, who was now in our midst and would, in His adult life, become the redeemer of the world.

Eventually, I rallied, or came back to myself, realising that I needed to make my guests comfortable – all of them. Yes, including the shepherds! I'd get the servants to prepare some food and drink, using the best vessels of course . . .

Rushing out of the barn into the dawn, I almost tripped over myself with excitement and amazement, delirious with what I had just witnessed.



Calling out to the servants,
even before I reached the
door, I began giving the orders
breathlessly, unable to get the
instructions out in a coherent
manner.

I noted the look of surprise
on the servants' faces, as if
they did not recognise me.
I hardly recognised myself –
giving orders for the best
delectable culinary delights
and expensive wares, as if
royal guests had arrived!

My inn would be talked about
for years to come! This was
absolutely amazing! Perhaps
I should put the rates up . . .
Ah, maybe not! That was not
the point of all this – was it?
I'd met the Messiah, Christ,
the Saviour, and things could
never be the same again.

I'd never be the same!

For a start, I would need to review
the overpriced rates I had charged
the current guests.

Also, I would certainly not be
charging Joseph and Mary for their
stay! In fact, I must find a useful
gift to give them, and something
suitable for the child, whenever
they decided to leave.

And the worship! What a
revelation! . . . Now that I saw
what true worship looked like . . .
wow! So much to learn; so much
to unlearn!

And then it struck me: there are
things of greater value than
money. Let's face it: who could
ever purchase something as
valuable as the gift of heaven!



'Mary brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.' (Luke 2:7)



'The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." '
(Luke 2:10-12)



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