

## Christmas Day

### *An Innkeeper and the Interrupting God*

You're familiar with the characters in the Christmas story. In addition to Jesus there is Mary and Joseph, we hear the angels and watch the shepherds come along. Then in time the wise people appear. Visit the manger and you'll see these characters – though the wise people are still journeying so they are further away. But there's one person that's not present, though if you've ever seen a Christmas pageant, he always appears – though listening to the gospel story, you'll notice he doesn't get mentioned. All we have is a maybe-sort-of implication: 'And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.' Worked him out? ... That's right ... The innkeeper. Yet, there must have been an encounter of some kind because Mary had to move downstairs to the stable.

Well, this assumed character fascinates me, so I share with you a simple story about him.<sup>1</sup>

This innkeeper liked nothing more than a good night's sleep.  
But that night there was a knock at the door.  
'No room,' said the innkeeper. '  
But we're tired and have travelled through night and day.'  
'There's only the stable round the back. Here's two blankets.  
Sign the register.'  
So, they signed it: 'Mary and Joseph.'  
Then the innkeeper shut the door, climbed the stairs, got into bed,  
and went to sleep.  
But then, later, there was another knock at the door.  
'Excuse me. I wonder if you could lend us another, smaller blanket?'  
'There. One smaller blanket,' said the innkeeper.  
Then he shut the door, climbed the stairs, got into bed, and went to sleep.

But then a bright light woke him up.  
'That's *all* I need,' said the innkeeper.  
Then he shut the door, climbed the stairs, drew the curtains, got into bed, and went to sleep.  
But then there was *another* knock at the door.  
'We are three shepherds.'  
'Well, what's the matter? Lost your sheep?'  
'We've come to see Mary and Joseph.'  
'ROUND THE BACK,' said the innkeeper.  
Then he shut the door, climbed the stairs, got into bed, and went to sleep.  
But then there was yet *another* knock at the door.  
'We are three kings. We've come –  
'ROUND THE BACK!'  
He slammed the door, climbed the stairs, got into bed, and went to sleep.  
But *then* a chorus of singing woke him up.  
'RIGHT – THAT DOES IT!'  
So, he got out of bed, stomped down the stairs, threw open the door,  
went round the back, stormed into the stable,

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Allan, *Jesus' Christmas Party* (London: Rex Fox, 2011).

and was just about to speak when –  
'SSSHH!' whispered everybody. You'll wake the baby!  
'Baby?' said the innkeeper.  
'Yes, a baby has this night been born.'  
'Oh?' said the innkeeper, looking crossly in the manger.  
And just at that moment, suddenly, amazingly,  
his anger seemed to fly away.  
'Oh,' said the innkeeper, 'isn't he *lovely!*'  
In fact, he thought he was so special, he woke up *all* the guests at the inn,  
so that they could come and have a look at the baby too.  
So, no one got much sleep that night!

Nicholas Allen, who wrote that story, portrays a character who I can identify with, because that's what life is like. It's full of interruptions. As I was writing these notes, I was distracted by children screaming outside my window. I then settle down and the phone rings – or maybe, there's a knock at the door ... and yes, I admit ... I can be like the innkeeper, and I end up somewhat grumpy ... resentful that my peace and quiet, my concentration, my organised routine, or perhaps my sleep, has been disturbed.

But when I think about it, that's what Christmas is about. It's about an enormous interruption. Interrupting is something that God is given to doing. God has a habit of breaking into human history and interrupting our lives.

There was Joseph who had his respectable village wedding planned. But God comes along and says, 'Look mate. Your fiancé is pregnant, and what's more, her child is going to be my son.' Then there's Mary, who dreamed of a normal, domestic life with Joseph. But all her hopes are dashed. Then there were the shepherds, doing what shepherds do, and they get interrupted by a group of noisy angels. And, come along for the feast of the Epiphany in twelve days' time, and you'll hear how God threw the lives of some wise people into chaos ... all because God interrupted their lives by Mary giving birth to one called *Emmanuel* – which means, God-with-us.

God is with us, sharing our lives. When we encounter God who shares our lives, who is involved in them, then interruptions happen. God like to challenge and change us; transforming and renewing us with love.

I'm all wrapped up in me – worried about Alister's little world – and God knocks on my door and reminds me of this person who could do with a bit of care and a listening ear. Or perhaps all the bad news on the news is getting me down: the aggro of politicians; the unbridled nastiness of some humans, the suffering and grief of those about me. Then I'm reminded that I can't change the world, but I can let God change me. I can let God so interrupt me that I might help enrich another's person's life.

Christmas is about God interrupting our lives and showing us something new – a way of life that's based on Jesus – God-with-us – God who is love.

So, I'm wondering, how might God interrupt our lives as we leave this place today? Perhaps, with the nudge to forgive someone who has hurt us; to help a person in need; to invite to dinner someone who is feeling out of it; to give of our time and experience, our care and love, our money. Sure, these things, small though they may be, are interruptions, but in them we find God.

This Christmas may God interrupt our routines and our plans, so that we discover in some new way, the joy, peace, and love of this holy time. Like the innkeeper and his guests, may we know the delight of a God-interrupted life.

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*St Matthew's, Hastings – 25.12.2019*