

## **An Unexpected Welcome?**

*Keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels unaware.*  
Hebrews 13:1-2

Do you have any vivid memories of having experienced exceptional hospitality? Perhaps it was a sumptuous meal prepared by a gourmet chef, or a cosy bed and breakfast that provided a much-needed respite from your over-worked life, or maybe it *is* a continuing reality in the home of a close friend or a family member where you can always unburden your soul while feeling comfortable enough to put your stocking feet up on the coffee table.

Long ago, a very- pregnant Mary and a no-doubt road-weary Joseph arrived in Bethlehem, seeking shelter and hospitality, and OUR telling of the story usually casts aspersions on some unknown "inn keeper" who failed provide it....or DID he? Luke simply reports that Mary, having given birth, placed the Child in a manger "because there was no room for them in the inn."

Western Christianity, however, may have put an unintended "spin" upon that scenario of the inn, imaging that Joseph and Mary had driven up late one night, and with the assumption that they had guaranteed reservations at that Bethlehem Motel 6---perhaps one of those rooms with a small coffee maker and tiny shampoo and cream rinse bottles waiting---only to be told that their room had been given away, and, if that if they wanted shelter for the night, they would have to bed down in the garage! What was the matter with that heartless innkeeper---couldn't he see that Mary was about to give birth! What kind of stupid oaf would banish a pregnant woman to a stable!!! And year after year, we invoke the memory of that innkeeper as the first example of the inhospitable world to the Christ—an inhospitality that would, indeed, characterize his earthly ministry, as Isaiah reminds us: "He was despised and rejected of men..."

But do you know what a first century, Middle Eastern inn was probably like? Such inns are more commonly known by their later Arabic designation, "caravansary"--places to accommodate the caravan travelers who moved the commercial goods of the ancient world. The men who stopped at them were not sophisticated, white-collar business travelers, who tote laptops and hold MBAs. These were rough and tough camel jockeys, who probably drank much and bathed little. They were toughened by the rigors of crossing deserts, fighting off bandits, and maneuvering recalcitrant camels. "Inns" were large, open halls, where "travelers" sacked out together, with their saddlebags to cushion their scruffy heads, their knives handy, and one eye left open to guard against the unwarranted "attentions" of so many unsavory characters. Female "guests" were rare---if they came at all, they were probably paid to be there, if you know what I mean.

And so, if indeed, it was the conscious act of that innkeeper to banish Mary to the stable, it was, more likely, a great act of kindness---of hospitality---to offer her a place of privacy and relative security in which to give birth! In a society where animals---chickens, goats, donkeys, horses---often shared the house because they were considered such precious possessions, bedding down in a stable would probably not have offended the sensibilities of Mary and Joseph as it does ours. Perhaps, the innkeeper---having an inkling that he might just be "entertaining angels unaware"--- had given Christ the *best* of his rooms!

Each day, Christ comes to us looking for space in our lives, and, too often, finds that that we have "no room" for him---we may be too busy, or too anxious, or too self-absorbed. But he continues to ask us, as Mary and Joseph must have asked that innkeeper, to make room: alongside our friendships, next to our desks, within our relationships, smack-dab in the center of our thoughts. And if there is a lesson to be learned from our Innkeeper, it may be this: that God does not require of us THE BEST THERE IS ---if that were so, we would be hard pressed to give Him anything at all. Rather, He asks us to give THE BEST WE HAVE TO GIVE. God requires nothing more. God requires nothing less.

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