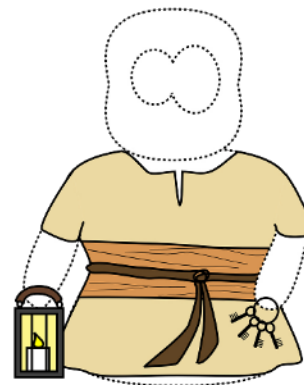


Bible Heroes

The (invisible) Innkeeper

Teachers
Story notes



Essential Teachers notes:

This story may surprise your children, it may make them question and claim to 'know better' but delving into the historical and cultural time of Jesus is a great gift to our understanding of his birth. Jesus' birth story has been very sanitised and westernised, a stable allows us to dismiss the idea of cattle sharing our homes, a practice still common a couple of centuries ago in northern Europe. An innkeeper is a construct from the idea of guest room, yet any descendant of David would have been able to find shelter in Bethlehem, and it would have been an insult to either turn family way or choose an inn over their hospitality. Jesus was born into a home not his own, but into a culture that would have cherished it's ancestry and that same family would have been witnesses to his first few hours.

Main Passage : Matthew 1, Luke 2

Additional passages : Matthew 5:15

I wonder how well you know the Christmas story, I wonder if you've ever dressed up as the characters or coloured pictures of the baby Jesus... you probably know the story really well. But sometimes, we tell stories so often we forget the original.

In the story of Cinderella what did the sisters look like - ugly? nope. in the original the sisters were beautiful but had ugly hearts. The Christmas story is a bit like that. We know there was no guest room for Mary and Joseph to stay in... and that's where people get the character of an innkeeper, but... there probably wasn't an innkeeper!

To understand this we need to go back and look at some of the houses that people lived in when Jesus was born and the kind of things people did.

The bible tells us Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem because that's where Joseph's family came from. I wonder if you have relatives that live in a different town or city. Joseph would have gone to stay with his relatives. When you went to visit relatives you stayed with them, it would have been very rude for Joseph to go and stay in an inn. So lets call this relative Tahan.

Tahan hears about the census and knows that means lots of family will come back to Bethlehem. All the family who still live in Bethlehem get together to decide where everyone will stay. Perhaps some of the family are richer and offer to take more guests, perhaps they have bigger houses with courtyards, Tahan hasn't got a big house. The people in bigger houses take the more important guests, everyone wants to have the more important guests.

Then someone mentions Joseph. The room goes quiet. Nobody wanted to offer their house to Joseph. Joseph married a pregnant girl. People in Bethlehem all those years ago though being pregnant before you were married was a terrible thing. Do you remember that when Joseph had discovered Mary was pregnant he too had thought about leaving her, but an angel had told him that he should marry Mary. Tahan knows they already have enough people to fill their guest room but Joseph and Mary are still welcome to stay with them.

So the day comes and Joseph and Mary arrive, Mary is huge, her belly holding a wriggling baby. Just about every house looks the same in Bethlehem, like a cube with a few windows and a door. There is a little gated area outside that the animals move about in and the household animals are wandering around in the fresh air. When it gets cold the animals are brought inside for the night but there won't be space tonight. Luckily it's warm, the kind of night shepherds stay out in the fields rather than come back to town. I wonder if Joseph had been there before? Tahan opens the door and welcomes them into his home.

Inside, big wooden beams go across half of the room making a platform, and a small set of steps sit in the middle of one side wall. Upstairs is called the guest room, it's where the lamps are lit because from there they give light to the whole house. Usually Tahan and his family sleep up there, but it's full with guests tonight so the family will sleep downstairs. Tahan doesn't mind, he sometimes sleeps downstairs in the winter when the animals come in, the animals help keep him warm.

Tahan apologises to Joseph and Mary that they won't be in the guest room, but offers them warm blankets and soft straw beds. Mary probably woke the whole house giving birth to baby Jesus. And when Jesus is born where should he go? At the end of the room are two small hollows filled with soft straws for the animals food, so the newborn baby is laid into this soft protecting shape, where it can shelter and sleep. Perhaps we think Tahan silly for not recognising Jesus was the most important guest he'd ever host, even when a load of shepherds turned up with stories about angels filling the sky. What a big blunder to make. But perhaps, this was all of God's big plan? Perhaps Jesus was better in a manger, open for the world to see, than up in a guest room? What do you think?

Today's hero is the invisible innkeeper because he shows us the gift of a blunder.