

Christmas Day
(25 December)

SHIPRAH'S STORY



MY NAME IS SHIPRAH. Well, it isn't *really*, but it is what everyone calls me.

My real name is Dinah, but, years ago, after a young neighbour had a difficult birth, I had battled for hours to save the life of a mother and her baby. Afterwards someone quipped that I was their very own 'Shiprah.' I threw up my hands at that, protesting that Shiprah and Puah had risked their lives to save the lives of countless Hebrew boys in Egypt; all I'd done was use my skill to save two lives.

Secretly, though, a warm glow spread through me: I was pleased by the comparison with my ancestor in life and faith, and even more delighted when the name caught on. 'Call for Shiprah,' people say when a woman's time is near and I go running, no matter what the time, day or night.

There is no finer feeling in all the world than to be the one ready to greet a new life as they enter the world: praying God's blessing on them and then handing them into the care of their mothers.

Right now, however, I am relieved that there are no babies due in Bethlehem: Rebekah's baby came last month, and Esther's isn't due for a while yet. So my skills won't be needed. It's just as well, because our house is bursting at the seams.



We live in *Бетлѐм*, my husband Saul and I. We have one of the biggest houses in the town. Not as large as some of the houses in Jerusalem but big, nevertheless.

Lots of room upstairs for our family, with room to spare for any passing guests and a separate area downstairs for the animals.

Normally the house feels spacious and airy, but over the past few weeks people have started arriving at our door. My husband's second cousin, then my nephew and his wife. After them, friends of friends until the house is fuller than I have ever known it. My serving girl Naomi and I are busy dawn till dusk, hurrying here and there, fetching and carrying, making sure all our many guests are cared for.

'What have they all come for?' I wailed to Saul. Of course, I was pleased to welcome them. My mother had taught me the gift and importance of hospitality. No friends or stranger seeking refuge would ever be turned from my door. But this was getting ridiculous.

'I'm not really sure,' he shrugged. 'There's a rumour about a census, so everyone is travelling to their ancestral home, just in case.'

'Just in case of what?'

'Well, you never know with the Romans, it's always better to look like you're doing what they say.'

I tutted. 'The Romans.' We talked about them all the time. They filled our lives with dread, often more by what we imagined they would do than what we had seen with our own eyes. The fear of them was what kept us subdued. I sensed it everywhere I went – the horror of what they might do hanging over us, never leaving us.

This latest product of that fear was a house full of guests – and full of noise. Everywhere I looked, someone was

there, taking up space and making their needs known. I tried to remind myself that I was delighted to look after them, but even I wasn't convinced by my attempt.



THEN, ONE DAY, EARLY in the morning I heard a weary knock at the street door. My frustration bubbled over and I yelled more loudly than I meant to that we couldn't welcome anyone else and that there really was no more room – unless they didn't mind sleeping with the animals.

My husband went to open the door, with me a few steps behind him. I opened my mouth ready to say that enough was enough and we were sorry, but they would have to look elsewhere. But then I checked myself: this was no stranger.

'Cousin Joseph?' I said, hesitantly. His father had moved north years ago, but we had played together as children, and I had never forgotten him.

He smiled, his tired face breaking into a familiar warm grin. So much about him had changed since I saw him last, but I'd recognize that smile anywhere.

'You have a full house,' he observed. I flushed with embarrassment. (Clearly my voice had carried as far as street outside.) 'It took us longer to get here than I thought it would.'

'You heard the census rumour too?' My husband asked.

'Yes,' Joseph replied. 'It looks like everyone else had the same idea as us: travel home just in case we need to be here. But Mary's progress was slower than usual.'

He moved slightly so I could see the person beside him, leaning her full weight on his arm. She was a young woman, little more than a girl really. She was heavily pregnant and breathing shallowly in the way women do when the baby they carry has grown so large that there is no room left for a full breath. She appeared to be at the very end of her strength. Drops of sweat stood out on her forehead and her face twisted momentarily in pain.

'It looks as though you got here just in time,' my husband said. 'We'll move some of our guests out of the upper room.'

'Where to?' My irritation spilled over once more.

Mary, standing at the door, moaned gently and gripped Joseph's arm so tightly that he winced. My frustrations melted away in a single moment, as years of experience drew my full attention onto the woman in front of me. Her baby was on its way.

'We're too late for that,' I said. 'I don't think Mary could get up those stairs now.'

She shook her head gratefully. She glanced at Joseph, who seemed torn between his concern for her and terror at what was to come.

'Don't worry,' Saul said to him, 'Shiprah will take care of Mary. Come with me.' Joseph slumped with relief as Saul put his arm around him and guided him up the stairs to the overfull living space.



'YOU WEREN'T JOKING ABOUT THE ANIMALS,' Mary said in a gap between her labour pains, as I settled her into the straw next to the feeding trough.

'Quietest and safest place for you right now,' I reassured her.



THE HOURS PASSED SLOWLY, as they always did during labour. Waves of anguish wracked Mary, as the instincts of her young body took over and pushed the baby into the world.

Not for the first time, I reflected that there was a reason this was called labour. No labourer worked harder than a woman when she gave birth. As time went on, Mary became increasingly exhausted. I looked at her anxiously from below my lashes. The long journey from Nazareth followed by a difficult labouring had used up more of her strength than I was comfortable with. Over the years, I had seen far too many women lose their own lives even as they wrestled to bring new life into the world.

'Perhaps someday the Lord God himself should be made to be born as a baby,' I said at one point, through gritted teeth. 'Then he might find a better way to bring new life into the world.'

Mary looked at me and seemed about to say something, but another wave of agony overtook her, and her words were swallowed in a scream of pain.

At long last, when the night sky outside the house was

at its darkest, Mary's baby was born. A healthy baby boy, who announced his arrival into the world with a lusty cry. The sounds of rejoicing from above us in the house indicated that our houseful of guests had laboured with us in spirit through the long pain-filled hours.

I held his tiny form wonderingly in my wrinkled, coarse hands. This was the moment that made all that labouring worthwhile. Here was a baby, like hundreds of babies before him, who was taking his first tentative breaths in this strange and dangerous world. He screwed up his eyes and wailed piercingly. I looked up at Mary, whose face was shining with weary delight, and back again to the baby. He took a breath, ready for another cry, but then paused. His large, dark eyes opened, and it felt as though he was looking right at me and that his gaze shone with a wisdom that reached back to the very dawn of time.

I hesitated. This was a moment I had experienced so many times before – and yet had never felt like this. This time, it felt as though I held in my arms not just a new life but life itself. This time, it felt as though I was looking hope in the eye. I shook my head. I was getting fanciful in my old age.

I swaddled him deftly and laid him in the feeding trough. It was the safest place for him. A baby as small as this would risk being trampled in the living quarters above. I turned as Joseph reached the bottom of the steps, his face beaming with joy.

'I put little Joseph in the feeding trough,' I told him. He smiled, 'Not Joseph. His name is Jesus – Saviour.

He has come to save God's people.'

I laughed. Parents always had bold notions for their children but this was beyond anything I had ever heard before.

'You'll see,' said Joseph.

All of a sudden, I needed a moment alone. Something was different. Something important had changed and I couldn't work out what it was. I stepped out into the street and looked back through the window at the new family. Joseph's grandiose words were still ringing in my ears. How ridiculous that he should say such a thing! A baby as important as that wouldn't be left to be born like this.



I FELT A PRESENCE AT MY SIDE and looked down to see Naomi, who had followed me out with a new swaddling cloth for when the baby soiled the first one.

'What's that light?' she asked.

I looked up. She was right: the night sky had an odd sheen as though something had recently been shining in it.

Just then, a noise at the end of the street made us both turn. There, hurrying in my direction was a group of shepherds, laughing and chattering with excitement. What on earth were they doing here at this time of night? Surely they hadn't left their sheep alone on the hillside? They were heading right for us.

I readied myself. If they thought they were coming into my house, they could think again.