

# Christmas in Bethlehem

Norah Anderson

*Two friends meet by the roadside on Christmas Eve and chat:*

"What is this noise in Bethlehem?  
What is the clamour, the rush to and fro?  
Why are the streets filled with people?  
What are they doing – where are they going?"

Is there a fair, or some celebration  
Why are the people hurrying so?  
So many people – so many animals,  
What are they doing? I would like to know."

"It isn't a fair, or a feast, or a big festival  
But people their taxes must pay.  
Caesar Augustus has laid down an order  
All dues must be collected today."

"All of these people who've travelled so far,  
Where will they sleep tonight?  
The night will be cold, and Bethlehem's small,  
Will they find beds alright?"

"The town may be small but there are plenty of inns."

"The donkeys, and oxen, and camels, will there be shelter for these?"

"There are plenty of stables, with hay, and with straw,  
They will be kept warm from the icy cold breeze."

"And who are that couple who passed us just now?  
She looks so white and so weary, yet somehow serene,  
He helps her to walk and guards her from jostling,  
Why is he so anxious? What does it mean?"

"Oh didn't you know. They are Joseph and Mary,  
A couple from Nazareth, way out of town.  
She's expecting a child, very soon I believe  
'Tis to be hoped that she can lie down.

*At Midnight*

Night has now fallen on Bethlehem Town.  
It is cold, it is dark, it is all very quiet.  
People are sleeping, the busy day done,  
But stay, a light shines from a stable,  
Why can that be, no light but that one?

Oh so much has happened – the Christ-Child is born!  
Born in a stable, this wonderful night,  
Born to bring peace, salvation and joy,  
Born to bring love – to put evil to flight.

But why in a stable, this heavenly Child?  
No blankets, no bed, no welcoming crowd?  
How can it be – this cheerless arrival?  
Why no love for this baby so fair?

Ah, didn't thou not know, Men's hearts are hard,  
People are selfish and careless and wild.  
No room – no room – no room at the inn,  
No room for the Heavenly Child.

In all of sleeping Bethlehem  
Did no-one care?  
Amongst all those people, homes and houses  
Was there no shelter anywhere?

'Yes' one man cried, not much, but a little,  
An innkeeper offered his stable, draughty and bare,  
How little to give to the Heavenly Baby  
How little shelter from the cold night air.

Did no-one else give anything?  
Anything for this baby so precious, so brave?  
Did no-one give a greeting, a welcome  
To the Son of God, born this world to save?

Yes, shepherds out on the hillside,  
Humble men, tired and poor  
Heard of the birth of the Baby  
And fell on their knees in awe.

Were there no others with gifts for the Babe?  
Where were the people – where, Oh where?  
The Light of the World, the Saviour of Men,  
Born in a stable and the world didn't care.

Yes, there were Wise Men, only three,  
Who saw in the sky the guiding star  
And followed to where the baby lay  
And gave Him their gifts they'd carried afar.

But no love for the Baby  
Who would suffer for us, in pain and in danger,  
Who had come to this earth, the world to  
save,  
Was there no love for the babe in the  
manger?

*The two friends sit down to rest*

And now I would ask you, O friend of mine  
Two thousand years have gone since the  
Babe's birth,  
Do Men now love Him, and serve Him, and  
praise Him.  
Does the world know the Baby's true worth?

I have to tell you that many hearts are hard,  
And people are busy, and occupied  
With work, and money and leisure and  
pleasure,  
And many forget that Jesus died.

Oh What can we give Him, we who care?  
What can we do for Him, He who died?  
How can we serve our Loving Lord?  
How can we show we are on His side?

He asks so little, and yet He asks all,  
All that matters – all and all,  
He asks our love, our hearts, our service,  
He asks our trust, our faith, our worship.

What can we give Him, this new year coming?  
All that we would  
To show our loving.

We can remember the Baby, born in the hay,  
Remember He died for us, that sad, sad day,  
Remember that all on earth are His,  
That to care for anyone is to care for Him.

Christmas again, 2000 years later,  
A New Year dawning, so many new days.  
Help us, dear Lord, to love Thee, to serve Thee  
Each new day that comes, to give Thee our  
praise.

## **Angela Merici (1474-1540)**

2009 is the International Year of the Child, and Angela is a good saint to remember as the year gets underway. Not only did she herself survive a harsh childhood, but she went on to dedicate her own life to helping children in need.

Angela was born near Lake Garda, in Desenzano, where she was orphaned as a young child. The 1480s were hardly an easy time for orphaned girls, but somehow Angela survived to grow into her teens, when she became a Franciscan tertiary. However miserable her own childhood, Angela chose to let it work for good in her life: she decided to devote her own life to the education of poor girls. Girls! This was a time when most of the men were illiterate! But Angela was an audacious woman, and she had only just begun. She and some close companions set to work in the name of Christ, seeking out the poor families in their community. Angela taught the young girls all that she could, and prayed with them, assuring them that even they were precious in the eyes of their Creator.

All of which left the Roman Catholic Church badly baffled. What should they do with religious sisters who had taken no vows, still wore their lay clothes, and who, instead of walling themselves up in some nunnery to lead an enclosed life, and spent their days in a decidedly mobile, highly visible fashion - out and about in community support?

It wasn't until 1565, some 25 years AFTER Angela's death, that the Church decided it approved of such work. By then the Ursuline nuns, as they were by then called, were going from strength to strength. They still flourish today, with some 2400 Ursuline Sisters in 27 provinces on six continents, and have been well described as 'the oldest and most considerable teaching order of women in the RC Church.'

It took nearly 300 years, but in 1807 the Roman Catholic Church decided that Angela, unveiled, unenclosed and unsupervised as she had been, had been a saint after all - and 'made' her one.