**JOSEPH’S MONOLOGUE – ‘THEY WERE MY NEIGHBOURS’**

I remember the moment I knew we were in trouble. Mary, my wife, pregnant to the point of popping, declared that the pain was beginning. I knew we didn’t have long, so I kept knocking on all the doors that had a glimmer of light peeping through the windows. Door after door the answer was ‘No, sorry – no room here’ or ‘Not tonight – but come back tomorrow’. Come back tomorrow? That’s not how it works when you’ve got a wife that’s about to give birth! And not only that, this is a huge responsibility. The baby isn’t mine you see. The baby is God’s, so I have an even greater responsibility to ensure that this baby enters the world safely! We needed a place to stay. We needed love in that moment. But just as I was about to give in, take Mary off the donkey and make soft place for her to sit down an alleyway, I saw a house with an attached barn where I could hear gentle animal noises wafting into the night air.

‘Wait there,’ I said to Mary. She simply nodded and kept breathing just like her cousin Elizabeth had told her to.

‘I’ll be back,’ I said. I knocked on the large timber door and heard some scurrying behind the door and talking. Please come, I thought, please come quickly – I need help, I need a neighbour!

The door opened, and there peering round were the blurry eyes of two kind faces. Quickly I told my story, and when they heard they ushered Mary and me into their barn. They had no room in their inn – it was the census after all, the woman had explained. ‘Oh yes, I know!’ I wanted to shout. But instead, I just gave my grateful thanks ,as I felt we were safe again. We had a roof – albeit a cattle shed over our heads – clean cloths and fresh water provided by the kind couple, and a gentle touch on my shoulder by a large hand and a knowing look. He’d been there before, he understood what was happening, and he just smiled telling me everything would be OK.

You know – it *was* OK – more than OK! My fear vanished as soon as Jesus entered the world. That kind couple became our neighbours. We were quite different – different backgrounds, different upbringing, different way of life – but love had brought us together. You see, I have a feeling that Jesus is going to bring love wherever he goes. In that barn, love came down. Love made an entrance, and that love cemented love between neighbours. I will never forget it.

**MARY’S MONOLOGUE – ‘THEY ARE MY NEIGHBOURS’**

I didn’t want to tell Joseph I was getting frightened, but I truly was. I was sore from riding on the donkey, my back was aching – and then I felt the pain starting and I knew we didn’t have long. I needed to find shelter, quickly, so I could give birth to Jesus. But every time Joseph knocked on a door we got the same answer. ‘No room,’ they kept saying. I could see Joseph’s distress, the feeling of responsibility weighing heavy on his shoulders, and no one seemed to be able to help us. I was starting to lose hope when Joseph saw a glimmer of light coming from an open window. He looked at me and simply said, ‘Let’s hope it’s a friendly face.’ He knocked, I waited. Then the door opened and two faces peered round the door. As soon as they saw I was pregnant they quickly ushered us to their cattle shed at the side of their house. The woman beckoned us over, and Joseph led the donkey and me into the animals’ shed. OK – it wasn’t quite what I was expecting, but the kindness that shone from the eyes of this couple made it all right. The woman said she’d bring water and fresh cloths, and in a few minutes Joseph had settled me on the hay with fresh blankets around me, and I knew all would be well.

I looked at the faces of the animals and they looked back at me. I wanted to say ‘Hello, neighbours!’ but I realised that sounded a little strange. Especially as the pain was growing and I knew it wouldn’t be long before the baby came. I simply couldn’t wait. The couple left then, to give us some privacy, but they said we could call them if we need anything at all. Joseph waved thankfully and I smiled my best smile despite the pain. I was truly grateful.

Well, baby Jesus arrived. Joseph went to tell the couple and they quickly hurried back. They looked into the face of Jesus like they’d never seen a baby before! But to be honest, I knew he was very special even though I say so myself. The man stroked the top of my head gently and whispered, ‘Well done, Mary – you’re a mother now.’ The lady smiled, not taking her eyes from Jesus. She simply touched Joseph’s hand and said, ‘You came as strangers, but you leave as friends.’

Shortly afterwards there was a knock at the shed door. In came three men, one carrying a sheep. They explained that they didn’t want to intrude, and yes it did sound strange, but when they had been looking after their sheep on a local hillside they had been visited by an angel! I suppose they were surprised when we seemed to accept this as normal, I have to say. They asked if they could see the baby. They’d been told he was going to be a Saviour. I explained that I too had met an angel and I understood a little of what they were feeling. The shepherds were so grateful to have met Jesus that we asked them to stay just a little longer. We had begun that night feeling all alone, but we ended up making new friends! The shepherds promised to watch out for Jesus as he grew, and I believe one of them in particular kept a close eye on Jesus. You see, that’s what friends do, that’s what neighbours do, and that’s what the love of our boy Jesus brought into the world.

God has given us precious people to support us over the years as we have tried to be good parents to Jesus. But I’ve never forgotten that couple who gave us a safe place to bring him into the world. Us in the cattle shed, them next door – neighbours in every sense of the word. We came as strangers, but the love Jesus brought definitely meant that we left as friends.

**SHEPHERD’S MONOLOGUE – ‘THEY BECAME MY NEIGHBOUR’**

My heart was pounding as I ran down the hillside. Something very special was happening, and I wanted to get to this newborn baby as fast as I could. As I ran, my mind was filled with the sound of the angels singing. I’d never heard anything so beautiful in all my life! It made me feel as though I had been transported to another world. But that would make sense, I guess, seeing as the angels came from Heaven!

I’ve seen new babies before and I’ve gazed in wonder at them, but when I walked through the wooden doors of that shed I knew there was something very different about this baby. I felt rather out of place – I’d been with the sheep all night and not had a chance to wash or change. But the mother looked up and beckoned us over. I took a tentative step forward, and then the father beckoned for us to get a better look at the baby. My friends were following so closely I could feel their breath on the back of my neck. We gazed in wonder at the baby Jesus.

‘Then the mother said, ‘Thank you.’

‘Thank you?’ What was she saying thank you to me for? It was me that should be thanking her for allowing three unknown farmhands enter their private space like that. I didn’t understand.

But then the father repeated: ‘Thank you.’

It must have been obvious I didn’t understand. The father – Joseph was his name – continued:

‘Thank you for sharing this moment with us. We wanted to share Jesus with friends, but we don’t have family or friends nearby – we’re only here for the census. So thank you for sharing Jesus with us. These moments are precious.’

Nobody has ever made me feel so welcome. Me, a shepherd, generally looked down upon by many. Some feel we are a worthless lot. Yet this man Joseph, and his wife Mary, they saw me as their friend, their neighbour. And in that moment I knew this baby could change the world. No crown for a newborn king, no silk wrappings for his tiny body – just a feeding trough where the cows had been fed, hay to keep him warm, some cloth that they said had been given by a new friend – and love. Love in the purest sense. Yes, that’s what was different – the love I felt with people I’d never met before. Something joined us that night that changed my life for ever, and my friends too.

In that moment I knew that love had come down from Heaven. I don’t know how it worked, I had no idea what the life of that baby Jesus was going to look like. What I did know was that love had come down from Heaven – the angels had sung as much. I followed his life you know. I’m older and greyer than when I first met Jesus in that cattle shed, but I followed him and I remember his teaching. Jesus had lots of followers, he taught about being blessed, how to be happy on this earth. One of the things I’ll never forget is that he said: ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.’ *(Shepherd nods)*

I’ve seen God in him you know – in Jesus, that baby born to be King. I’ve tried to keep pure in heart – not easy for someone like me, but I’m trying. And another thing: I also heard that Jesus had said, ‘Love one another and love your neighbour as yourself.’ I learned about love that night in the cattle shed, and I learned it from Mary and Joseph. I learnt about being welcomed as a friend and neighbour. I have so much to thank Jesus for.