

22nd December 2023

Regrets

**"Of all the fruitless errands, sending a tear
to look after a day that is gone is the most fruitless."**

Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* (Mr Ralph Nickleby)

In the section of *Nicholas Nickleby* which Dickens titles, "How Mr. Ralph Nickleby Provided for his Niece and Sister-in-Law", he affirms that regretting actions after "a day that is gone" is fruitless. If that's the case, I wonder how the Innkeeper in the Christmas narrative dealt with regrets. We know little of the Innkeeper, of course, given that he (or she) gets no *actual* mention in the Gospels. We just don't know if a forlorn guest-house owner stood in a doorway announcing in a stentorian voice (beloved of Nativity Plays) "I am so sorry. But we are full!" We don't even know if there was an Innkeeper at all. We're simply informed that "there was no room for them at the Inn", and through the years, we've just added in the details.

But what if there *was* an Innkeeper who turned the travellers away? What if they sneaked into a cattle-yard because they had no help from the Innkeeper or anyone? What if they were like the rough sleepers we walk round on our High Street? What if the Innkeeper discovered that a baby had been born in the yard, and before anything could be done about it, they were long gone? What if? What if? What if? If the Inn Keeper (real or imagined) was human at all, "What if?" would have been a frequently asked question. And why? Because that's what we would be like.

"Regrets, I've had a few, but, then again, too few to mention". So sings Frank Sinatra. Like you, I've had a few regrets and not, sadly, "too few to mention." So how do I, and the Inn Keeper, and you, deal with these regrets? We learn from them, hopefully, but we can't undo them. Dickens is right. It is always a fruitless exercise to shed tears for what is past.

The Innkeeper missed the birth of Jesus. His (or her) loss, I reckon. I hope there was a lesson learned, because all the regrets in the world weren't going to change what had happened. But I hope, too, the Innkeeper resolved that when the *next* Census was arranged, and the town was jam-packed full again, a miracle wasn't missed this time around, when something amazing might be happening in the Inn's back yard.

A prayer for today

*It might be a "fruitless errand" to dwell on regrets,
but it is never fruitless to learn, and grow, and move on.*