

## The Thought for the Week

Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> December 2020

He emerged from the Metro at the Plaza Station in Washington DC, and positioned himself against a wall beside a waste paper bin.

By most measures, he was non-descript – a youngish white man, in jeans, a long-sleeved t-shirt and a baseball cap.

From a small case, he removed a violin.

Placing the open case at his feet, he shrewdly threw in a few dollars and pocket change as an enticement to others, swivelled it to face pedestrians passing by, and began to play.

It was ten to eight on a Friday morning.

In the next 43 minutes, as the violinist performed 6 great classical pieces, 1,097 people passed by.

Almost all of them on their way to work in mid-level Government jobs.

No one knew that the violinist was one of the world's leading classical musicians.

Joshua Bell is an acclaimed virtuoso who fills concert halls.

One composer said of him, "He plays like a god"

On this Friday morning, Bell played on one of the most valuable violins ever made – a Stradivari valued at £2 and half million.

The train station provided superb acoustics for Bell's performance.

His beautiful music filled the morning air.

A reporter for the Washington Post stood observing and recording the event.

In the first three minutes, 63 people walked past without seeming to notice the virtuoso.

Then a man stopped, looked, and quietly walked on.

Across the 45 minutes that Joshua Bell played, 7 people stopped to listen for at least a minute; 27 people dropped some money in the case.

Usually, in concert, Bell gets paid £800 a minute.

This day, in total, he received \$32 and 17 cents.

At the end of each piece, there was no applause, just silent indifference.

The master musician was ignored.

People walked past musical glory and splendour without giving a second glance.

Except for two people –

A postal worker called John, described by the reporter as a smallish man with a baldish head. John had learned the violin as a boy. He recognised the quality of Joshua Bell's performance and stood enjoying it from a distance.

And there was a demographer named Stacey. Stacey had seen Bell in concert three weeks before. She recognised him.

"And here he was," she remarked, the international virtuoso, sawing away, begging for money." She had no idea what was going on, but whatever it was, she was determined not to miss it.

Stacey positioned herself 3 metres away from Bell, front row, centre.

She had a huge grin on her face.

The grin, and Stacey, remained planted in that spot until the end.

Stacey told the reporter, "It was the most astonishing thing I have ever seen in Washington. Joshua Bell was standing there playing in the rush hour, and people were not stopping, not even looking, and some were flipping quarters at him! Quarters! I was thinking, O my gosh, what kind of city do I live in that this could happen?"

In another place, at another time, the night was filled with heavenly music and a brilliant light.

Never had earth seen such glory.

Angels sang to some workers in the fields about a majestic one, a Saviour, a Chosen One, the Long Awaited One, the Lord.

His arrival was good news of great joy for all people.

Where would the workers find this glorious one?

A palace?

A temple?

A concert hall with an orchestra playing perhaps?

No,

The angel gave the astonishing news, “You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger!”

Who would expect to find a heavenly King in such a setting?

Usually He lived among angels – now among cattle.

No splendid clothing.

And not a mighty warrior, a learned scholar or a majestic ruler – but a baby – humanity at its weakest.

What a surprising place to find God.

The One who created the universe and flings stars into space placed Himself in the inexperienced hands of a teenage Mum and the rough hands of a carpenter.

Most people ignored him and went about their business.

Only some shepherds who were let into the secret of his identity, stopped to acknowledge Him and enter into the joy of His presence in their world.

One of the immense puzzles of Christmas is why God did it that way?

Why not make the angelic sound and light show a global event?

God came as a baby quite simply because God wants to be accessible to all people – everyone.

I don’t know about you, but people who impress me with their brilliance usually intimidate me. I admire them, but I do it at a distance.

I don’t feel worthy to get close and engage with them.

The high and the mighty, the powerful and the great live in a world apart.

The shepherds would never have entered King Herod’s Palace to see an infant King.

But they had no problem coming to a stable behind a pub in Bethlehem to see a baby.

Babies don’t intimidate us.

We don’t need to impress them.

Babies smile at everyone.

In coming as a vulnerable baby, God’s message was, “I am not here to impress you or make you feel inadequate. I am here to engage with you – whoever you are.”

To quote a writer, “Jesus came as He did to make clear that no one and no place however humble was beneath His dignity, and every age and every stage of life He would make holy.”

Like a world renowned violinist playing in a train station, God made Himself accessible to everyone so that we can all enjoy the beauty of His gift.

Finding Joshua Bell in the subway, John and Stacey rejoiced.

Finding Jesus in the manger, the shepherds went back to work, changed people.

That is what Christmas does when its music really heard by those who listen and look.

I have heard some folk talk about Christmas 2020 “being cancelled” because we have had to drastically change our plans on account of the Corona virus, and we are having to live within very defined limits – but, God’s love, His peace, His love and His power are never restricted. They are freely available to all who trust in the One who was “born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth”.

Hold fast to that as we move into 2021!

The Revd Fraser R Aitken, Locum Minister