

Pause and Reflect

A Subway Station in Washington DC on a cold January morning.

The height of rush hour.

A busking violinist plays as thousands push their way through the station concourse.

Occasionally someone slows their pace to throw a dollar into the cap. But not many.

A toddler stops – entranced - before being pulled on by his mother.

For 45 minutes the strains of Bach's Partita Number 2 in D minor soar above the rush hour clamour and at the end the violinist gathers up his earnings – \$32 dollars, packs away his violin and moves on.

And no-one realises what they have just experienced, or quite whose presence they had been in.

If they had stopped and listened, they would have heard one of the most complex and intricate pieces of music ever written played on a Stradivarius worth \$3.5 million by Joshua Bell, one of the world's most highly acclaimed

violinists, taking part in an experiment organised by the Washington Post.

Two days later Joshua Bell would play before a packed theatre in Boston, long since sold out – tickets averaging \$100 a piece.

But the rush hour crowds just pushed on past, never realising who it was in their midst.

At the beginning of his gospel John writes, *'He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not recognise him.'*

As we celebrate Palm Sunday today, we think of Jesus, setting out to Jerusalem on a young donkey. The crowds that day *did* notice his arrival and shouted 'Hosanna', a word we'll say a lot today. But did they really recognise who he was?

Ponder on that as we sing our next hymn – We want to see Jesus lifted high.

There is something about Jesus and donkeys.

Before Jesus was born, he was carried inside his mother's womb to Bethlehem by another donkey, his birth in an animal shed marked only by the visit of poor shepherds.

In today's gospel reading we reach the culmination of centuries of history. '*The Lord will appear*' said the prophets. '*The Lord will come to his temple.*' Foretold centuries earlier by the prophet Zechariah. And today is the day. And he comes, as Zechariah said he would, '*gentle and riding on a donkey.*'

It's an incredibly busy day. Busy because it's the annual Passover Festival and people are flocking in their thousands to Jerusalem. Men, women and children. A journey Jesus used to make with his parents Mary and Joseph – remember that time when he was just 12, when they didn't notice that he hadn't joined them on the journey home?

The journey to Jerusalem was a noisy experience as everyone would traditionally be singing Psalm 118 as they drew close to the big city. It had become a Psalm for

pilgrims because of its references to the city gates – maybe those on the walk to Ely Cathedral on Holy Saturday should sing it as *they* reach the city? But it was written originally to celebrate military victories. The procession with branches was to honour returning armies. The one '*who came in the name of the Lord*' was the king or general who led them. So it was out of *tradition* that the crowd were singing this victorious Psalm and carrying with them palm branches.

But, on this day, there was no king or general leading an army into Jerusalem, victorious from battle. In first century AD, with Israel under Roman occupation, the crowds had nothing to celebrate. But, they sang the Psalm anyway, partly to celebrate the '*steadfast love of the Lord*', and partly to express their longing for a new Messiah – who would free them from the Romans and restore them as a nation. They were hopeful for the future, so sang joyfully of God's love enduring forever.

So Jesus arrives on a donkey. Not just any old donkey but a colt – a young donkey that had never been ridden. That, in itself, sounds a little risky, but this colt had seemingly been chosen by Jesus to be his method of transport that

day. We're told that as Jesus approached Bethage and Bethany, less than two miles from Jerusalem, he sent two of his disciples to the next village ahead of him, and he told them that they would find a colt tied there. *'Untie it and bring it here,'* he told them. He might have read their minds. *'Umm, Jesus, don't you think the owner will mind?'* and says, *'Tell him, 'The Lord needs it.'*" And it was just as they said. The colt was exactly where he said it would be. The owner asked them what they were doing untying it, and Jesus' words *'The Lord needs it'* seemed to work as no-one seems to have objected.

I wonder what we do when someone important we know is coming – perhaps a film star, perhaps a member of the royal family? What do we put out or set up to greet them? (Photos on screen).

Why do we do this?

What are we saying to the person concerned?

What are we saying to everyone who is watching?

When they brought the young donkey that had never been ridden to Jesus, they threw their coats onto its back and they put Jesus on it. Then we read that *'As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the ground.'*

Why their cloaks you might ask? Surely a donkey walking over your cloak wasn't going to be a good idea? And cloaks *then* meant something different to cloaks or coats today.

In Jesus' time, a cloak or outer garment was precious. You only had one of them. They were worth a lot of money because they were what kept you warm, day or night, and you could even use them as a promise that you'd pay back a loan – you'd always pay it back as you'd want your cloak back! But here, the cloaks are going down thick and fast as people make Jesus' entry into Jerusalem a more comfortable one. Why might they have done this? What might it have meant to them to offer Jesus their cloaks?

I wonder what, in your life, is your most precious possession? Share with the person next to you. It has to be a thing, not a person.
(What and why?)

What would it feel to put it on the road or the path and let a donkey walk over it? Would you do it?

It seems on this day the disciples were wanting to show Jesus that he was their king by offering their cloaks. How can we show Jesus that he is the king of our lives? Are we willing to use the things that are valuable to us for God? Maybe our time, our money, our possessions?

But if the disciples understood who Jesus was that day, not everyone did. Just as the crowds at the subway station in Washington DC didn't recognise that in their midst was Joshua Bell, one of world's highly acclaimed violinists, most of those on the road to Jerusalem that day didn't recognise Jesus for who he was. Not a king who would free them from Roman occupation, but a king who washes the feet of disciples. A king who will go to a cross for our forgiveness, our healing, our new life, our salvation.

This Palm Sunday, in our hymns of hosanna, we cheer with the crowds. Do we cheer King Jesus the one who loves and serves? And will we follow Him?

This Holy Week as we cheer with the Palm Sunday crowds will we also stop and ponder?

This Holy Week, there are many opportunities for you to walk the week with Jesus. There is something on in the church every day. Opportunities to pause and to ponder the King who humbles himself, becoming nothing, taking on the very nature of a servant, wrapping a towel around his waist and washing feet.

To stop and ponder the King who dies in my place so that my wrongdoing can be forgiven.

Don't let yourself get from Palm Sunday to Easter Day without stopping at least at Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. And reflect on what it might mean for you to make *him* your King.

There in their midst, was one who played the most beautiful music the world has ever known. And the crowds ... they pushed on past, never stopping to hear. What about you and me this Holy Week? Will we pause and take it in? Let's pray we will.