

Jack and the Beans Talk



Once upon a time there was a poor widow who had an only son named Jack. Jack was a hair stylist and worked at Goldilocks, in Stiltskin's Retail Park. All they had to live on was Jack's earnings which didn't amount to much, and he had quite a bit of credit card debt. Still living with his mother in his twenty-second year wasn't ideal either, but needs must.

Every Sunday, Jack took his mother to the church on the hill in his Vauxhall Corsa. Each week he winced as she put their contribution on the plate during the service, for they had so little to spare, but he was too afraid to tell his mother. Jack had been reckless with money when he was a boy (something to do with selling a cow) and it had taken years to regain his mother's trust. His mother was serious about contributing generously to church funds because she was a big believer in sacrificing things dear to her as an act of faith, reminding her that God is sovereign and everything is really His. Jack struggled with this, being rather too fond of money to happily give it up.

Today Jack didn't feel like after-service coffee so he left his Mother to chat with Mrs Hubbard and he took a wander around the cemetery behind the church. He wanted some space. He hadn't gone far when he met a funny-looking old man, who said to him: "Good morning, Jack."

"Good morning to you," said Jack, and wondered how he knew his name.

"Well, Jack, and where are you off to?" said the man.

"Nowhere really, just wandering." Jack sat on a bench under a giant tree and absentmindedly checked his phone to see if he had any new followers on Twitter. He hadn't.

The funny-looking old man, who had a crooked nose and crooked legs and crooked stick, walked straight up to him and sat beside him on the bench, sucking in the cool morning air. A moment or two passed in semi-awkward silence. The old man broke it by slapping his thigh and exclaiming,

"Oh, you look the proper sort of chap who's concerned about this and that," Jack looked up from his phone. "Tell me about your giving."

"Excuse me?" said Jack, taken aback. What a personal question, he thought. Who does he think he is? I always attract weirdos. I must have a sign on my forehead that says "Talk to me if you're..."

The man interrupted his train of thought. "Your giving. What do you give? How do you feel about it?" said the man, and as he did he offered a brown paper bag to Jack. It was full of assorted beans coated in chocolate, salted caramel and icing sugar. They looked delicious and expensive. "Here you are, Jack, help yourself," and he presented Jack the paper bag.

Jack paused, irritated and a bit unsure of accepting sweets from strangers, which he was fairly sure he'd been told not to do, but he could see they were from Thornton's and the packet was newly opened, so he picked a few out and popped them into his mouth. He crunched on his beans and his irritableness seemed to disappear like the fog that had been lingering in the cemetery and was

vanishing in the weak sun. With his mouth full, he asked the old man, “So, what do you want to know?”

“I want to know why you find giving hard,” said the man.

“We’ve *hardly* got anything to *give*,” he mumbled, still chewing on the beans.

“Yes, thought so,” said the old man looping strands of his wispy beard around his forefinger and staring in the distance. Jack took another handful of beans. He couldn’t help himself. This one was gingerbread flavoured.

“When we give our money to the church, I’m worried we won’t have enough for ourselves.”

“Giving is always an act of faith Jack. But more so when you have little to start with. You show great faith by what you give. But what if I told you about a very special gift? How would you like to give something away and still have just as much of it?”

This man’s insane, thought Jack. But he was curious and he wanted another gingerbread bean. He reached into the paper bag and took another handful. “Whaddya mean?” spluttered Jack, showering his lap with bean crumbs.

The old man emptied what was left of the bag of beans onto the bench and counted them. Twelve beans. Jack’s eyes widened. He’d eaten at least a dozen beans, possibly twice as many. But the small bag, which, Jack was very familiar with by now, couldn’t have held that many. Yet here they were on the bench. How could this be? Was it a trick? He’d eaten so many beans.

As Jack’s stared in disbelief, the old man scooped up all the beans, popped them back into the paper bag and slid them into an inside pocket of his tatty jacket.

“Never mind all this beans-talk Jack, let’s talk about the *greatest* gift you can give.”

Jack didn’t feel like he had any great gifts at all, apart from styling hair. The old man went on, “You have a great gift dear Jack, but you keep it all to yourself. You fret and you worry about giving, and yet all the while you are hoarding great treasure.”

Jack was irritated by this strange man and his beans and his talk of great treasure that Jack was absolutely sure he did not possess. “So what’s this great treasure I have then? How can I give it away and still have it? What are you on about?”

“You can give it away and not just *have* it, but have *more* of it. It grows!”

This is exactly what happens, thought Jack, when you talk to strangers in cemeteries. He’d had quite enough and unless this man was going to open that bag of beans again, he was off. He got to his feet and was about to go but the man leapt up and implored him,

“You have a gift Jack! You have *faith*,” he pointed his stick back towards the church. “You have the greatest story ever told. You’ve heard it since you were a boy and yet you never share it with anyone. It’s treasure Jack. You talk and talk all day at work but you never share the story of your faith. This is the *gift* you have Jack and when you share it, you don’t lose a bit of it. You give it away and you still have all of it left. It’s the most special treasure of all. In fact you don’t only get to keep what you started with Jack, but your treasure grows. Your faith gets stronger.”

Jack was stunned. He didn’t know what to say.

“You’re not poor Jack. You’re rich. And you can give it all away without worrying about bills. Give away the story. Tell all your friends. Tell your clients. Tell your neighbour’s dog.” Jack still wondered how this man knew so much about him. “And the Good News is that it’s for ever and it’s for everyone.”