

WORKSHEET 1

Aidan and the gift horse

'Here! She's all yours! What do you think?' King Oswin's face lit up as he was talking. 'She's three years old, can do 30 miles in a day without stopping, and her father's one of my best. She's all yours. What do you think, Aidan?'

Aidan didn't know what to think. To hide his confusion, the monk walked over to inspect the present. The horse was a magnificent chestnut mare, 15 hands high, the colour of gingerbread, with a bushy blond mane and tail. He stared into the large dark eyes, and stroked her forehead. The horse neighed in appreciation. Yes, she was a beautiful creature.

'I'm... amazed, my lord.' He turned to face the king. 'I don't deserve it. She's... wonderful.'

'She's yours. I thought you'd make good use of her on your travels. I hear you've been all over my kingdom in the last year, and it's always on foot. I know you see it as your duty to visit every little village, and I'm glad you're doing it, but you're putting yourself in danger.'

'That goes with the territory, my lord. God called me to be a messenger to your people, so I have to go there.'

The king was having none of it. 'But you don't need to do it *on foot!* A man of your learning and leadership needs to go places *quickly*. You need to be safe from bandits - and you're not getting any younger, either. I know you like the simple life, but there must be limits, even for a man of God! You need a horse and you need a saddle to help you ride it. Would you accept them as a gift, from one friend to another?'

Aidan sighed, smiled and then nodded. The king had given him so much help already. It would be the height of bad manners to refuse the horse - and Aidan knew that Oswin had enemies. They would love to hear it, if the royal generosity was insulted by a mere priest.

Later that morning, he set out from King Oswin's fortress, to head for the new monastery being constructed on the island of Lindisfarne. Had the school been built yet? He was hoping to start taking in new students before Christmas. They would be learning how to read and to

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write, and be instructed in this new Christian faith that the king wanted the whole kingdom to hear. This Christianity was something new and special. It had a God who knew what it was like to suffer as a human being. He wasn't something distant and cruel, like the old gods who feasted on the blood of their victims. This God cared, and people mattered to him.

As the horse trotted along, Aidan's eyes drifted from the road ahead, down to the saddle he was sitting on. It was a wonderful piece of work, with tiny stitches sewn in intricate patterns around strong brass studs. Wait a minute - they *were* brass weren't they? They weren't something *else*, like silver or gold? That would make the saddle worth more than the horse. Phew! It was quite a gift. He passed some peasants who were heading the other way up the road, towards the fortress. Were they beggars? Their clothes showed a great deal of wear and tear, and filth. One or two looked up at him as he passed, but the rest kept their eyes to the ground. It doesn't do to stare the rich and powerful in the face. They might think you're being cheeky, and you don't do that to people with guards, and horses and swords. Aidan rode on, feeling a little odd. Normally, he'd have said hallo to those people and stopped to chat, but today, he hadn't. Why?

Was it the horse? He was high off the ground, and the beggars weren't. Yes. Then he remembered the frowning faces of the two men who did look up. They'd been looking at the saddle. Were they thinking of trying to get their hands on it? Nervously, he glanced over his shoulder. No, they were gone. But something still felt wrong. As a monk, Aidan normally didn't have any personal possessions. Everything he had was owned by the church. Years ago, he'd dedicated his life to God, trusting him to meet his needs, both in this life and the next. Any money Aidan had was given to the monastery. It left him free to get on with the real business of meeting people and spreading the word.

But this horse was starting to worry him. What if he met someone who fancied taking it? Aidan wasn't a weakling, but the idea of fighting someone for a horse felt wrong. What would happen when he made camp for the night? Someone could just creep up and steal it while he was asleep! He glanced up. There, up ahead, was a crossroads - and a large man standing, just standing there, facing this way. He seemed to be waiting. For the first time in years, Aidan wondered if he ought to be carrying some kind of weapon.

Further up the road, Cedd saw a horseman coming. He felt desperate. There was no pride left in him - he couldn't afford it any more. Perhaps this person would help. As the sound of trotting came closer, Cedd fell to his knees, head bowed to say the words he'd been crying out to every traveller on that road, all day: 'Please, sir, my family is starving, my wife is dead, there are five children to feed! Bandits took everything. Can you help me? Please?' Most travellers hadn't bothered to look in his direction. A few threw coins. Cedd bowed lower. This horseman had to be rich. Surely he could help? He heard the horse stop, then the sound of someone dismounting and leading the horse towards him. Cedd kept his head bowed. What was going on? Then he heard a voice.

'Brother, could you please tell me why you are begging?'

People normally didn't ask, so Cedd just blurted it all out at once to the stranger. 'I'm a farmer. Our crops failed, then last week, bandits came and took all our stores. They left us

nothing. I was away at market with the children. When I came back, I found... 'Tears were welling up in the big man's eyes as he remembered the scene. 'The house was burning, everything burning... and my wife... she's dead... and everything's gone...' His shoulders heaved as he fought back the tears.

'Where are your children now?'

'With a neighbour. I'm trying to find work, but there's nothing. I'm trying! I really am trying...'

Aidan sat down beside Cedd. 'Listen, I want you to do something for me.'

The big man looked up, suspiciously. 'What?'

'See that saddle?' Aidan pointed to the horse. 'What do you think it's worth?'

Cedd shook his head in confusion. 'A hundred, two hundred gold pieces, perhaps... a lot. Why?'

'It's yours. I want you to have it.'

There was an embarrassed silence. This didn't make sense. 'The saddle? What would I do with a saddle? I haven't got a donkey now, let alone a horse!'

'I want you to have the horse as well.'

There was a shocked silence. 'This is a rich man's joke, isn't it?'

Aidan shook his head. Cedd stared at him, wild-eyed. 'You're offering me the horse, and the saddle. For what?'

'For you. And your children. Sell the horse and saddle, and that'll buy your family a fresh start - and it sounds like you all need it, don't you?'

Cedd didn't know whether to shake his head or nod. Things like this just didn't happen. 'But... don't you want them?'

Aidan shrugged. 'They're more trouble than they're worth, believe me. Tell you what - I'll accompany you to the next town and show you a man who'll give you a decent price. Is that all right? And on the way, you can tell me more about your children. Are any of them bright? Would any of them want to read and write?'

They walked together down the road, talking, with Aidan showing Cedd how to lead the horse by the reins. There are some things that you can only do face to face.