

“Dare to be a Donkey”

Date: 14 April 2019, Palm Sunday

Text: Luke 19: 28 - 40

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Christians in Medieval times focused their Palm Sunday devotional reflection on how to honour Christ as the ruler of one's personal life. It's an obvious theme, isn't it, given that the crowds at Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem welcomed him with the words "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!" But to help them in their Palm Sunday reflections, Christians were encouraged to imagine themselves in the place of the donkey within the Palm Sunday story. Now that may sound a little odd, but 600 years ago it was seen as a helpful way into understanding how we can honour Christ as King. So, this morning, I invite you to put yourself in the donkey's place, and together we will conduct the kind of reflective meditation European Christians embarked on hundreds of years ago.

So what do we think of when we conjure up the image of a donkey? The humble second cousin of the mighty horse, neither as swift nor as elegant. The donkey is the butt of jokes. It is the one that brays. G.K. Chesterton caught the sense of this in his poem about the Palm Sunday donkey:

With monstrous head and sickening cry, And ears like errant wings,

The devil's walking parody on all four-footed things.

But above all, the donkey symbolizes independence, stubbornness, wilfulness. Once it has resolved itself not to move, nothing will entice it. Donkeys are not easily ruled. They are not inclined to submit. It is this aspect of the donkey's nature that can come so close to our own. Neither do we easily submit to the rule of another. In fact, when it comes to rulers, we tend to be quite satisfied being the rulers of our own life. Yet when the disciples did as Jesus commanded and the people asked, "Why are you taking that donkey?", the disciples responded as they were told "the master has need of it". No questions, no arguments. The people simply let the disciples continue, honouring the need of Jesus. And this young donkey -- who had never been sat on, never been ridden, never been controlled -- the wilful one -- this young donkey also gave in to the command of the Lord, submitting to Jesus' will.

This begs a question of us. How easily do we submit to the reign of Jesus in our lives? How intentionally do we shape our lives taking Christ as our master? How willing are we to comply with his directions and commands for the living of life: loving the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind; and loving our neighbour as ourselves? In other words, do we give in to our wilful nature, or do we like this donkey obediently respond? [pause to reflect]

Before the donkey's feet people spread their cloaks. They cut down palm branches, laying them down as well. A simple way of rolling out the red carpet. And although it was the donkey that trod on them, it was not for its honour. The animal was but a simple donkey, doing what it was called to do -- nothing more. The honour was for Christ, not the donkey doing Christ's work.

This begs a question for us. When things happen, when things go well, when we achieve something, where do we place the honour? We seem to be hard-wired with a natural need to have our ego stroked, so we easily accept praise. Yet how often do we stop and point to God when things go well, acknowledging and thanking God for God's role, acknowledging that we have only used well the abilities God has given us? When we pray in that anxious time of need, and in the end things unfold as we asked, do we thank God for it? When people respond in gratitude for the compassionate help we offered them in their need, do we remember to acknowledge God for inspiring us to care for others as Christ cares for us? In other words, do we think the palm leaves are spread out for us, or do we remember that it is for the one who rules in life? Part of how we acknowledge the sovereignty of God in our lives is to acknowledge that God works through our lives... in our lives. Are we content, like the donkey, to let people's gaze pass us by to fall on Christ rather than ourselves? [pause to reflect]

The donkey, indeed, did walk on the coats and the branches, working for the coming King. Yes, the honour did not belong to the donkey. And yet, perhaps, the donkey did feel some honour in what it was called to do. G.K. Chesterton thought so, and he described it this way in the final verse of his poem "The Donkey":

"Fools! For I also had my hour, One far, fierce hour, and sweet

There was a shout about my ears, And palms beneath my feet."

The moon that hangs in our sky is dull and grey. It has brightness only because the sun shines on it, reflecting the sun's splendour and power. So too the donkey received a portion of glory. Not because it deserved it, but because the Lord imparted it to the humble servant animal which he called into his service. As Paul put it this way in 2nd Corinthians (3:18): "But all of us who are Christians... reflect like mirrors the glory of the Lord. We are being changed in ever-increasing splendour into his image -- a transformation which comes from the Lord." By acknowledging Christ's rule, by becoming Christ's subjects.... the king's glory is seen in the changing of our own lives. This change honours the one who changes us. This becomes our growing witness in the world. For when we, as Paul wrote, "reflect like mirrors the glory of the Lord" we become for the world the best evidence for the existence of God. This begs a question of us. Do we wish that imparted glory? Are we open to this transformation -- a

transformation that turns us more and more into the joy-filled servants of our King? Do we wish to be like the donkey: happy to have our chosen part in the parade? [pause to reflect]

This is what it is to be a subject of Christ the King. It is to be obedient: desiring to live out our calling, faithfully. It is to be honour – giving: acknowledging God for how God works in our lives. It is to have joy: knowing that God is changing us for Christ's sake. Can there be anything more wonderful than that?

But where did the donkey's journey begin? It began with its release! The donkey was bound to something, and it could not escape. Not until it was released by the Lord's command. We know something of that, and that is put into poignant perspective by the cross of Good Friday. Christ has done the same for us: in our own way, in our own need. What are we thankful for...for the release we may have experienced because of Christ? [pause to reflect].

What happened at the end of the triumphal entrance into Jerusalem? What happened when Jesus had no more need for the donkey? The story doesn't say. But I can imagine Jesus let himself down to the ground, turned the the donkey, and gave it a pat. It's what any of us would do, isn't it? A way of showing appreciation—to say "thanks".

In Jesus' parable of the talents, the master returns to review what his servants have done in his service. He says, "Well done, good and faithful servant.... Enter into the joy of your Master!" (Matthew 25:21). That would be a wonderful thing for us to hear from the Master of our life when it is our turn to come before him. To know, that in our lives, we have given our King joy! Which we do, when we honour him in what we say and do.

Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord! And blessed is the one who welcomes him, honours him, serves him, thanks him!