

Palm Sunday: 29th March 2015 (Year B)

Palm Gospel: Mk. 11.1-11

Passion Liturgy: Isa. 50.4-9a. Passion Gospel: Mk. 15.1-39

For those of us lucky enough to have been present, I'm sure we all remember with some joy the day that our Sunday School brought Charlie the donkey right here into St. Andrew's church. And so with fond memories of that priceless occasion, we commemorate the day when Jesus entered into Jerusalem riding on the back of a donkey. An unusual choice of transport for a charismatic leader, even in 1st century Palestine.

So why a donkey, or as Mark's gospel describes it, the colt of a mule? Some say it was because the donkey is such an inoffensive, humble creature, the very opposite of a horse which, in those days, was a symbol of power and authority and often used for war. You wouldn't see Roman leaders or princelings riding about on a donkey. To put things into a modern day perspective, the donkey was equivalent to the transit van, the horse to a Range Rover or Maserati.

I'd like to read you a bit of 'donkey theology' written by a young man from Papua New Guinea in conversation with two elders from Jamaica:

Mr. Cunningham, an elder, said, 'Patient man ride donkey.' To ride a donkey is not a joy-ride because the first lesson to learn is patience. If a rider is impatient and wants to reach his destination quickly by forcing the donkey, he will

eventually find himself struggling against the donkey. Often the donkey comes to a halt or moves slowly. Patience is one of the virtues you learn from bearing with the hesitant behaviour of the donkey.

Another elder, Mr. Morris, liked to point out how humbly a donkey carries its load. He owned a donkey and knew how useful donkeys were as a means of transportation. They carry water, [sugar] cane, people, they pull carts and travel long distances as well. They help with farm work, carry food for individuals and families. Donkeys know about weight. Mr. Morris quoted Mark 8:34: 'Then Christ called his disciples and said "If anyone wants to come with me, he must forget himself and carry his cross and follow me." In Jamaica, a donkey often carries two hampers placed on the right and left of its back. It is like a yoke, a burden to carry. The donkey is the symbol of the cross.' Koloma Make

Here's a poem written by G. K. Chesterton called 'The Donkey':

*When fishes flew and forests walked
And figs grew upon thorn,
Some moment when the moon was blood
Then surely I was born.*

*With monstrous head and sickening cry
And ears like errant wings,
The devils walking parody
On all four-footed things.*

*The tattered outlaw of the earth,
Of ancient crooked will;
Stave, scourge, deride me: I am numb,
I keep my secret still.*

*Fools! For I also had my hour;
One far fierce hour and sweet:
There was a shout about my ears,
And palms before my feet.*

This poem is all about reversed perspectives. We only know that this is a donkey talking because of the poem's title. He, or she, implies that Jesus is the one who was carried, but the donkey never mentions him by name.

In the first verse, the donkey sets himself up as a gruesome impossibility of nature, like fishes that fly, forests that walk or figs that grow on thorns. To be born under a blood-shot moon suggests that he may be a herald of the coming apocalypse from Revelation (6.12). He has little self-esteem, thinking himself ugly, with a hideous voice and ridiculous ears like a parody of angel's wings.

The mood is tragic, as though the donkey is bitter about the way humanity has treated both him and the one he carried. He likens himself to a fallen creature of devilish origin – a 'tattered outlaw of the earth.' – how many times have we felt similarly down on our selves, and yet we know that Christ was regarded in much the same way, rejected by his own people (Mark 6:3-6), treated as a criminal (John 18:30), beaten and abused (Luke 23.22).

And so as the triumphal procession of Palm Sunday leads remorselessly towards the crucifixion, so the donkey recalls and relives the pains he's endured. He knows what it is to be starved, beaten, ridiculed; he's been made numb by mistreatment, but he also knows that he's been blessed with a powerful secret. He can round on those who don't understand the reversals that take place in the kingdom and that we need to bring about here, and call them 'Fools!'

The secret he reveals to us is, that for all he has suffered both before and since, he knows that for '*one far fierce hour and sweet*' he carried the one who flung stars and galaxies into space, the creator of the world, the living embodiment of love, upon his back.

And this knowledge seems to endow him with an incredible strength and fortitude, such that he and all his descendants can pick up the cross he's been asked to carry. He'll be able to bear anything that comes his way, any load he's made to shift, any cruelty he's made to endure, simply because he knows, with a patient faith beyond death, that the God of love rules.

Perhaps this is why Donkeys are often marked in their fur with a cross, a dark cross emblazoned on their backs at the shoulders, an eternal mark in divine recognition of their patient, humble, devotion.

Amen.

Palm Gospel: Mark 11.1-11

Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

11 When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ²and said to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. ³If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately." ' ⁴They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵some of the bystanders said to them, 'What are you doing, untying the colt?' ⁶They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. ⁷Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. ⁸Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, 'Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

¹⁰ Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

11 Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

Liturgy of the Passion

Isaiah 50.4-9a

The Servant's Humiliation and Vindication

The Lord God has given me
the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain
the weary with a word.
Morning by morning he awakens—
awakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.
The Lord God has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backwards.
I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.

The Lord God helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
he who vindicates me is near.
Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together.
Who are my adversaries?
Let them confront me.
It is the Lord God who helps me;
who will declare me guilty?
All of them will wear out like a garment;
the moth will eat them up.

Passion Gospel: Mark 15.1-39

Jesus before Pilate

¹⁵ As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. ²Pilate asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' He answered him, 'You say so.' ³Then the chief priests accused him of many things. ⁴Pilate asked him again, 'Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.' ⁵But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.

Pilate Hands Jesus over to Be Crucified

⁶ Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. ⁷Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. ⁸So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. ⁹Then he answered them, 'Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?' ¹⁰For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. ¹¹But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. ¹²Pilate spoke to them again, 'Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?' ¹³They shouted back, 'Crucify him!' ¹⁴Pilate asked them, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Crucify him!' ¹⁵So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

The Soldiers Mock Jesus

¹⁶ Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort. ¹⁷And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. ¹⁸And they began saluting him, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' ¹⁹They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. ²⁰After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

The Crucifixion of Jesus

²¹ They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. ²²Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). ²³And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. ²⁴And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.

²⁵ It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him.

²⁶The inscription of the charge against him read, 'The King of the Jews.' ²⁷And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. ²⁹Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, ³⁰save yourself, and come down from the cross!' ³¹In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. ³²Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.' Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

The Death of Jesus

³³ When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ³⁴At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' ³⁵When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'Listen, he is calling for Elijah.' ³⁶And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.' ³⁷Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. ³⁸And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. ³⁹Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'

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