

Palm Sunday 2021: for the congregations of St James' East Malling and Holy Trinity Larkfield

Readings: Isaiah 50, 4-9a
 Philippians 2, 5-11
 Mark 14, 1-39 [40-end]

Palm Sunday's donkey has not only found its way into biblical history because of its fulfilment of a prophecy - 'Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey' (Zechariah 9,9) - but into folklore as well.

There are at least two legendary theories. The first is that because Jesus used a donkey to ride into Jerusalem as His passion and death drew near, that He blessed him with a cross on his back to remind us of the donkey's part in it all, just as the robin is credited with a red breast because he tried to alleviate Jesus' suffering on the cross by pulling a thorn from his head, only to inflict injury on himself. The second is that when Jesus was carrying His cross to Calvary a small donkey tried to help Him, but was unable to get through the crowd. When it dispersed, the donkey went to Jesus and stood behind His cross and, as the sun declined, its shadow fell across the donkey so that now every donkey carries the mark.

I'm sure you know G K Chesterton's poem:

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 devil's walking parody
On all four-footed things.

The tattered outlaw of the earth,
Of ancient crooked will;
Starve, scourge, deride me: I am dumb,
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.

W E Orchard (William Edwin, 1877-1955) tells a delightful story which begins at Christmas but has a significant Palm Sunday sting in the tail! Orchard was first a Presbyterian, then a Congregational minister, a renowned liturgist, pacifist, and ecumenist, who in 1917 presided at the ordination of Constance Todd, one of the first women ordained for Christian ministry in modern times. In 1932 he was received into the Roman Catholic Church and was ordained as a priest three years later: in 1943 he became chaplain to a community of Cistercian nuns in Brownhill in Gloucestershire, died there of cancer twelve years later and is buried in the cemetery of the Dominican priory in Woodchester. Let me recount the story for you.

'When Jesus was born in Bethlehem there were other animals in that stable besides the humble ass which brought His mother to the inn. There was the contemptuous camel, with a lip, the steed of some desert ranger. There was a proud war horse stabled there by a passing warrior. There was a strong bullock who drew the wagon of a great merchant. In the quiet of that Christmas night the four beasts munched their provender in silence.

We have all heard how that at midnight on Christmas Eve all the beasts in the world gain for a few fleeting moments the power of

human speech; now this miracle began on this very night in the stable at Bethlehem. The four beasts watched the carpenter Joseph, his wife Mary and the new-born child who lay in the manger.

'Humph', said the contemptuous camel, with a sniff, 'quite an ordinary child'.

'A little peasant child', said the proud horse with a snort, 'a common little kid'.

The great ox gave a grunt and said, 'A weak miserable little thing', and they all went on munching their hay and forgot about Joseph and Mary and the Babe in the manger.

Then outside the stable there was a sound of footsteps and men's voices, which could be faintly heard through the half-open stable door. The humble ass who had felt much too insignificant to join in the conversation of his betters (indeed he would have been severely snubbed had he dared to do anything so rash) turned his long ears to hear what the men were saying. Then for the first time that night he spoke. 'They are saying', said the ass, 'that a King is born this day'. There was a stir among the noble beasts at that news. 'Ah, he will need me', said the camel, 'to cross the trackless desert, for surely this King will be a great traveler, visiting all the cities of the world in His wisdom and magnificence'.

'He will need me', said the horse, 'to ride in triumph through the streets of the cities that He conquers, for He will be a mighty warrior'.

'No, it is I whom He will need', said the ox, 'for it is a bearer of great burdens to carry His merchandise, His gold and His silver that He will want the most'.

So they quarreled that night as to which of them the new-born King would need, and of the Baby in the manger they thought nothing at all; only the humble ass who had said nothing, for he thought he was too humble to be used at all, looked with mild brown eyes at the mother and her child as Mary crooned over the manger-cradle the baby's first lullaby.

But, after all, it was on the humble ass that the King rode into His city in the end.'

And so this beast of burden, in bible-story, legend and fable, carried into what has become known as the 'Holy City' the One who was Himself to carry on the Cross the burden of sin for humankind, for you and for me.

The story of Jesus' entry in this way into Jerusalem is told in all four gospels. Whereas St John simply says 'Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it' (12,14), the others tell the preamble to the story and all say much the same:

'Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away' (Matt. 21, 2-3).

"Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it you will find a colt tied there, which no-one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you 'Why are you doing this?' tell him, 'The Lord needs it, and will send it back here shortly'." (Mark 11, 2-3)

'Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find a colt tied there, which no-one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' tell him, 'The Lord needs it' (Luke 19, 30-31).

The reference that both Mark and Luke make to the fact that nobody had ever ridden that donkey was presumably because unused animals were regarded as particularly suitable for religious purposes: the Lord's requirement of Moses and Aaron for a ceremonial slaughter was that it was to be 'a red heifer without defect or blemish and that has never been under a yoke' (Numbers 19, 2); the Ark of the Covenant was to be carried on a new cart pulled by 'two cows that have calved and have never been yoked' (1 Samuel 6, 7).

But here's an interesting thought! 'The Lord needs it': where some versions say 'the master needs it' I'm told that the word 'master' can also be translated, from the Hebrew, as 'owner'. 'Its owner needs it'? This is pure surmise, but sometimes the

gospels allow us this speculation. I wonder whether at some time in the past Jesus had done something for the family which possessed that donkey, perhaps a son or daughter healed by this wandering prophet, perhaps a particular act of kindness or help given in a troubled situation which made the head of the household so grateful that he said, "Jesus, I am deeply in your debt and can never repay your goodness - but whatever I have is yours, and if you need anything you have only to say the word: treat all my goods as belonging to you". And when Jesus needed a donkey to fulfil that prophecy of Zechariah, that donkey was as good as His!

And in a way that says something about what we call 'stewardship', an acknowledgement that all that we have is God-given, and whatever we offer back to Him is just a fraction of all that He has given to us; an hour a week of worship which is just one of the 168 hours of life that God has given us that week; a small part of the gifts and abilities which He has given us which we can use in His service, both to the church and in the wider world; an immensely small portion in terms of financial giving compared to what God has given us - as Vanstone writes: 'morning glory, starlit sky, soaring music, scholar's truth, flight of swallows, autumn leaves, memory's treasure, grace of youth . . .'

I've spoken in a previous sermon of those occasions when Jesus needed something which an individual could provide, and in the giving that person, in so many gospel stories, was brought closer into contact with Jesus himself: a place to be born which a busy inn-keeper was able to provide; a drink at a well in Samaria; food to satisfy a large crowd - I wonder if that small boy with his loaves and fish ever forgot the look that Jesus gave him; a boat to use as a pulpit when the crowd was pressing in on him up to the water's edge - and Peter's just happened to be at hand; an act of love when He was nearing the end when, as Mark tells us in today's gospel reading a woman 'came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume' and anointed Him at Bethany; a shoulder to ease the load of the Cross on the way to Calvary

when Simon of Cyrene responded to an obvious need; and now, today, a donkey to enable Him to fulfil that prophecy -

"Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it you will find a colt tied there, which no-one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you 'Why are you doing this?' tell him, 'The Lord needs it, and will send it back here shortly'."

The Lord needs it: and what does He need of you? What has He asked of you in the past? And when you have given it, has Jesus not drawn you a little closer to Himself? Or is there something which He has asked which has hitherto been withheld?

On the face of it, the story of Palm Sunday seems to be one of celebration - the gospel accounts are all headed 'The Triumphal Entry', and for a few it was. But I often think of Palm Sunday as the tragedy of the ignored Christ. When I visited Jerusalem as part of a parish pilgrimage 25 years ago I walked that route: the narrow streets had me shoulder to shoulder with others coming and going, pushing and shoving, with shopkeepers plying their wares - it was an immensely bustling place, and Jerusalem's streets in Jesus' day would have turned the smallest group of bystanders into a jostling throng. But all I could think about on my visit was a whole city going about its business unaware of His presence.

Jerusalem has maintained its Palm Sunday procession ever since. In the 5th century a nun called Egeria wrote this in her travel diary:

'The bishop and all the people rise from their places, and start off down from the summit of the Mount of Olives. The babies and the ones too young to walk are carried on their parents' shoulders. Everyone is carrying branches, either of palm or olive, and they accompany the bishop in the very way the people did when once they went down with the Lord. They go on foot all down the mount to the city, and all through the city to the main church, but they have to go pretty gently on account of the older women and men among them who might get tired'.

That's an account of Palm Sunday in Jerusalem sixteen hundred years ago, and it has been marked in a similar way all through the centuries since. You may remember that shortly before the first Holy Week, in the story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead, the apostle Thomas, who was later to doubt Jesus' resurrection, boldly said to the others, 'Let us also go with him, that we may die with him' (John 11,16). Well, we've journeyed with Him through Lent, and we continue that journey on this Palm Sunday and through this coming Holy Week in the ways that Fr Nick provides for us in our two churches as well as in our own more personal preparation.

The 17th century Welsh poet Henry Vaughan (1622-95) concluded his poem about Palm Sunday in this way:

Dear feast of Palms, of Flowers and Dew!
Whose fruitful dawn sheds hope and lights;
Thy bright solemnities did shew,
The third glad day through two sad nights.

I'll get me up before the Sun,
I'll cut me boughs off many a tree
And all alone full early run
To gather flowers to welcome thee.

Never mind that he cribbed a line from George Herbert who died when Vaughan was 11 years old - we'll explore that a little on Easter Day - but here on Palm Sunday he is looking forward a few days, as we are through the dramatic days of Holy Week, to Easter Day, when he will 'gather flowers to welcome thee'. Hindsight is a wonderful thing, and we now know the story of that final week - the clearing-out of the Temple and the chief priests looking for a way to kill him, the anointing at Bethany, the last meal with his friends, the betrayal, trial and crucifixion. And we, whose commitment to Jesus might, please God, have grown a little during this season of Lent, will also share the Easter joy next Sunday.

But today we are where we are, on that procession into the capital city. I doubt that there will be many processions with donkeys in parishes and towns this year, but if there are most will look on with a degree of curiosity, and they'll look at the donkey without sifting out its deeper significance. Today's tragedy is the tragedy of an ignored Christ who has life to offer but whom the vast majority disregard. 'He came unto His own, and His own received Him not. But as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become children of God . . . ' (John 1,11-12).

As might have been said of those in Jerusalem two thousand years ago, so it might be said of those in today's secular and skeptical times - look what they're missing!

Hark! how the children shrill and high

Hosanna cry;

Their joys provoke the distant skie,

Where thrones and seraphim reply;

And their own Angels shine and sing

In a bright ring:

Such young sweet mirth

Makes heaven and earth

Joyn in a joyful Symphony.

(Henry Vaughan - 1621-95)