

A Palm Sunday Meditation

Psalm 118:1-2;, 19-29; Matthew 21:1-11

Holy Week begins! And it begins with a donkey. That's right. Jesus ordered it. He didn't order a beautiful white stallion. He didn't order one of Budweiser's magnificent Clydesdales. Clydesdales were not around until the 18th century in Scotland, anyway. Donkeys have been around forever. Donkey historians tells us they have been around for 7,000 years! In early Egyptian society, they were very high status animals, with very wealthy individuals owning herds of over 1,000! They have long symbolized patience, resilience and humility. Donkeys were brought to the Americas by Spanish explorers and they became essential during the Gold Rush for breeding mules. Actually, George Washington is credited with introducing them to the United States. In 1785, George Washington received a "royal gift" from King Charles III from Spain, a male donkey, which Washington used to breed mules that were more durable and efficient than horses for farm work.

So, Jesus just outside the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples saying, "Go ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'the Lord needs them. And he will send them back immediately.'" This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Zechariah, saying, "tell the daughters of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." The is the only record in the Gospels of Jesus' not walking! So why would he choose a donkey? The top Roman soldiers of Jesus' day rode on majestic horses that showed power, strength and authority. And we call this the "triumphal entry?" On a donkey?

Coming from the Mount of Olives, Jesus rode this donkey through the East Gate into the City of Jerusalem. If you're the kind of person that likes crowds, say New York City on New Years Eve, you would have liked to have been there as Jesus rode in. Crowds, for sure. Jerusalem had a population of about 40,000 but during the Passover Feast, it would swell to

over 100,000, maybe even 200,000 say some historians. Given the huge number of pilgrims in town, Jesus could not get a place in town. Instead, he stayed with friends in Bethany, about two miles east of Jerusalem. There is where we find the Mary and Martha story, with Martha being fretfully busy but Mary sitting at his feet and anointing him with oil.

It has always intrigued me that Jesus rode the donkey through the East Gate into Jerusalem. For you see, the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, at about the same time, would have been arriving through the West Gate. Yes, a Roman imperial procession was entering Jerusalem from the other side of the city, not on a donkey, but with great pomp and circumstance - white horse, armor, some even say behind a train of elephants. He did this every year at Passover because of the swelling population. He wanted to give a show of power and strength, fearing an uprising from Jews who were sick and tired of Roman rule. There were a lot of Zealots who could stir up the people against Rome. There was even one of Jesus' twelve disciples named "Simon the Zealot." The disciples were sick of the Romans lording it over them, like everyone else. Just a few verses prior to today's reading, the mother of James and John wanted Jesus to put them in power with him "when he came into his kingdom."

As he came into the city through the East Gate, many now calling it the Golden Gate, Jesus had a large number of folks following him, They began following him earlier in the town of Jericho, and that's where he healed two blind men. They had said to him, "Lord! Have pity on us, son of David." The crowd began to pick up even more and that's when they spread their cloaks on the road and cut down palm branches from the trees and spread them on the road too, thus we get Palm Sunday. I guess "Cloke Sunday" wouldn't have the same ring to it! And palm branches had become closely associated with victory in the Roman culture. The Latin word "palma" had become a synonym for victory itself. A lawyer who won a case would often decorate his house with palm leaves. It is even said that a palm tree sprung up miraculously at the temple of Nike, when Julius Caesar secured his rise to sole power.

So, Jesus' "triumphal entry" was planned by him. Palm Sunday didn't just happen by accident. He didn't just hop on a donkey so the people could see him better. He ordered the donkey. He rode into the city. And so the crowds shouted, "Hosanna to the son of David. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest heavens." They knew their Hebrew Bibles. They knew Zechariah's prophecy about riding in on a donkey. They knew that when David chose Solomon to be his replacement that Solomon rode in on a donkey in the book of First Kings. However, it is almost like he planned this to be the exact opposite of what was happening at the West Gate with the entrance of Pontius Pilate, the one who in a few days would condemn him to death. Jesus is the King! He did ride in on a donkey like Jewish royalty. But he did not come to overthrow Rome, like the people thought. He came to overthrow people's hearts. Palm Sunday, you could call it a protest of Roman power.

Palm Sunday does remind us that Jesus is real, that he has stood the test of time, that he is really the Messiah, the Christ that we need. In this time of wars and rumors of wars, sometimes you must wonder if this Jesus really is real! Does he really change outcomes? Is Palm Sunday really important in the large scheme of things? The Russian aggression in Ukraine still goes on; the United States and Israel are at war with Iran; China is sending more warplanes to Taiwan. What's next? It's enough to wear one down!

But in the long run, listen again to one of the greatest pieces about Jesus ever written and let it encourage you that you are doing the right thing by following Jesus, the one who rode in on a donkey and had palm branches thrown at his feet: It goes this way. You know it. "He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another obscure village, where he worked in a carpenter's shop until he was thirty. He never wrote a book, he never held an office, he never went to college, he never traveled more than two hundred miles from the place where he was born. He did none of the things usually associated with greatness. He had no credentials but himself. He was only thirty-three. His friends ran away. One of them denied him. He was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. While dying, his executioners gambled

for his clothing, the only property he had on earth. When he was dead, he was laid in a borrowed grave, through the pity of a friend. Nineteen centuries (now almost twenty-one) have come and gone and today Jesus is the central figure of the human race and the leader of mankind's progress. All the armies that have ever marched, all the navies that have ever sailed, all the parliaments that have ever sat, all the kings that have ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of mankind on earth, as powerfully as that one solitary life." AMEN.