

## What? On a Donkey?

Mark 11:1-11

April 5, 2009

It was Palm Sunday. A little girl left the church proudly and enthusiastically waving her palm branch as the family walked to their car. On their way home the father asked his little girl what she learned that day. She told him about the crowd waving their palm branches, Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, and that a crowd of people sang to Jesus.

The father was pleased with what she could repeat of what she heard that morning. He went on to ask her, “What was the song they were singing to Jesus?”

The little girl paused a bit, and then said, “I think it was ‘O Susanna’.”

Close, but not quite. “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” they sang out. The people lining the streets of Jerusalem that day believed the one who rode a donkey into their community was their potential liberator – the long-promised and awaited messiah. And he was ... just not like the one they thought he would be.

It was a whole lot more peaceful an entry than they thought it would be the day it happened. The people along the way thought that when Jesus entered the city a confrontation would ensue between he and the Roman officials. It’s actually what they wanted – what they hoped for – a confrontation – a violent confrontation – a military solution to their situation. Another way to translate “Hosanna” is “Save us,” and they meant now when they shouted it his way. The people who lined the street were ready – they were emotionally gearing up for the battle they were sure would follow.

And then, there was the realization that he was riding on a donkey – a donkey! He was riding an animal that symbolized peace. If he’d ridden in on a stallion, well, then things would have been different because that would have symbolized a conquering agenda. The people were blinded by their desire for political and economic power.<sup>1</sup>

Actually, while that’s the way we normally interpret what the scene represented to those in the crowd, the truth of the matter is Jesus riding a donkey into Jerusalem probably fueled their excitement. Think about it. If his riding into Jerusalem on a donkey disappointed them, why did they stick around? Why didn’t the parade fall apart before he ever hit the city limits?

Well, in I Kings, an aging King David gathered his religious leaders and instructed them to make arrangements for the coronation of the one who would take over the reins from him - Solomon. He told them to “have my son Solomon ride on my own mule.” (I Kings 1:32-34)

Mules are regarded as humble beasts - that is true. But they are also held in high-esteem. They are understood in Hebrew Scripture as the animal king’s ride. Let me explain why that was the case.

David grew up in the hill-country. He was a chieftain in the hill-country. Solomon was a son of a hill-country chieftain. While David became King of Israel, he never forgot his roots and so his royal mount was not a horse. Horses are good for riding around on when you live on the plains but for someone like David who got his start

leading “bands of raiders from cave to cave along rocky trails” a sure-footed mule was what the animal of preference.

It is for this reason that those who foretold the coming of a new king – a Messiah – always referenced that new king riding into Jerusalem on a donkey.<sup>2</sup>

While we find the scene ironic and symbolic of a different sort of messiah from this side of the cross and the Romans in Jerusalem probably found the scene a bit amusing, the Jews lining the streets would not have missed the symbolism and thus the image of Jesus riding into town on a young mule, most regard as an encouraging sign.

Now, some suggest that Jesus was lampooning the political powers of his day – that his entry was “a carefully planned, carnivalesque military procession.”<sup>3</sup> They note that Jesus was orchestrating a piece of “street theatre.”<sup>4</sup> They describe his entry as a planned comically subversive one.

By his entry, Jesus turned the understanding of power upside down. His entry could be seen as a humorous piece of political satire. With his feet probably dragging on the ground Jesus came as one who humbly rejects ruling over others by dominating them. By riding on a donkey he identified with the down and out rather than the rich and pompous. He exhibited a vulnerability and a rejection of violence as his way of leading. Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem challenged the dominant social order. His entry into Jerusalem was comical, dramatic, and, make no mistake about it, political.”<sup>5</sup>

No, the cheering on Palm Sunday didn’t turn to jeering because of Jesus’ choice of ride that day. Their cheering stopped because Jesus began to talk more about commitment and that all people were worth loving and that a cross was in his future. It was no longer about what Jesus could do for them but about what he expected them to do as a result of choosing to follow him that caused them to start calling for his head.

The stories told after Jesus entered Jerusalem no longer included miracles. They referenced what was going to have to be given up if one followed him. One great Methodist preacher once told the story of speaking on the campus of Nebraska Wesleyan University to a group of students interested in entering the ministry. When he finished his talk the group was asked for a show of hands of those who were definitely entering the parish ministry, only one raised their hand. One young lady spoke up and said, “I have a problem with your use of the word commitment. That sounds very binding and restricting.”<sup>6</sup>

Sometime during the early part of this week after Palm Sunday, Jesus entered the temple and he drove out the moneychangers and he invited in the lame and the poor and the sick and the outcasts of society. He announced that the doors to the church were open to seedy, smelly, street people and that upset some of the established people in his day, just as it sometimes upsets some in our day as well.

But, the final reason the cheering stopped after Palm Sunday was that the talk of the Kingdom of God Jesus offered began to be understood as something other than the restoration of Israel to the days of King David’s glory. There was talk of it taking sacrifice – talk of a cross – and not just for Jesus – but for all who follow him.<sup>7</sup>

And so we enter the eight most important days on the Christian calendar – the eight days of Holy Week. The Maple Grove Players are going to offer us a summary of the week between today and Easter Sunday morning.

We call it the Passion Story. I have found that the most helpful way to be ready for all that Easter offers us is to experience with others the significant events of this week – the evening meal the night before Jesus was betrayed – the crucifixion on Good Friday. We have developed some insightful and moving worship experiences for Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and I encourage you to join your brothers and sisters in Christ and that you not rely only on what we experience today to be the only preparation you make for Easter Sunday.

As the Maple Grove Players get ready to share with us the Passion Story to help us prepare for the rest of Holy Week let us stand as you are able and turn with me to page # 269 as we sing together *Lord, Who Throughout These Forty Days*.

1. King Duncan, “The Salvation Army Parade,” Collected Sermons (Dynamic Preaching, 2005), 0-000-0000-20.
2. Leonard Sweet, “Jesus Trends,” Homiletics, March – April, 2009, p. 47.
3. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Feasting on the Word (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 155.
4. Ibid., 155 Footnoted: (The image of “street theatre,” along with other insights into this text, is taken from Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 294.
5. Ibid. 157.
6. As quoted in Brett Blair’s “When the Cheering Stopped,” esermos.com Sermons (ChristianGlobe Network, 2003), 0-0000-0000-01.
7. Ibid.