

DONKEY

Holy Week started with a donkey, so it is appropriate that we start today's thinking about what animals can teach us about the Cross with donkeys. In fact we not only start Holy Week with a donkey, but Christmas as well, and some of you will be aware of that lovely, but now out-of-print book called 'Donkey's Glory' where a story is woven around three related animals – the first one Trottemenu bringing Mary to Bethlehem, her daughter N'lumah observing some of Jesus' healing miracles, and her son Laban being the one ridden on Palm Sunday. Total fantasy of course – not least because there is no mention of a donkey in the text of the Christmas story. But it is reasonable to assume there was one, because from very ancient times, the donkey was the normal means of transport for people of all kinds. I love U.A. Fanthorpe's Christmas poem 'What the donkey saw.'

No room at the inn, of course
And not that much in the stable,
What with the shepherds, Magi, Mary,
Joseph, the heavenly host –
Not to mention the baby
Using our manger as a cot.
You couldn't have squeezed another cherub in
For love or money.
Still, in spite of the overcrowding,
I did my best to make them feel wanted.
I could see the baby and I
Would be going places together.

In later years, the horse became the preferred animal for the rich and powerful, but ancient times saw King and peasant all riding the donkey. And of course it was also the pack animal - the carrier of goods to and from the market, the bearer of heavy loads.

That reminds me of the line in the hymn 'The Servant King' - 'There in the garden of tears my heavy load he chose to bear.' The donkey carried things that human beings were too weak to carry. And part of our picture of what happens on the cross is that Jesus takes on himself the sinfulness of everyone, the things that cripple us and disable us, that root us to the spot. Think how we use that language – 'It's all too much for me to bear' we say when things get on top of us – grief and suffering or whatever it may be. We can't carry it by ourselves. The agony in the garden is about Jesus wrestling with the decision to be the burden-carrier for us. So in addition to Christ *on* a donkey, which we will come to think about in a moment, we have perhaps the more unusual concept of Christ *as* a donkey – the willing carrier of burdens that we cannot carry for ourselves. On the cross he did what we could not do for ourselves.

And perhaps we should take a moment to reflect on journeying – an activity which in the ancient world could not have happened without donkeys. We rightly talk a lot these days about the Christian journey – it is a picture that many people find helpful. For example it is embedded in our baptism services – we say the child ‘begins their journey in faith.’ In an era where travel tends to be speedy, that is worth pondering. We tend to look for the shortest journey time – how to get from A to B in the quickest way. Maybe there is a risk of trying to do that with our spiritual journey – taking the express train route to God rather than the slow plodding of the donkey. I suspect that is a wrong way to do things. Like so many important things, the spiritual journey can’t be rushed. ‘One more step along the world I go’ says the children’s hymn, and we are wise to keep that speed all the way through life. But we do need to go on journeying. If we ever think we have ‘arrived’ then we have got it wrong. Pippa’s parents had a next door neighbour who had been a missionary. I only knew him as an elderly man – but my abiding memory is of his going off to find a book, and bringing it to show me, saying ‘I have just been reading this, and do you know, I had never thought...’ I can’t remember what it was that had struck as new – but he seemed in great contrast to the many older people I knew who didn’t want to have any new insights at all. As long as we live, the donkey sets us the example of steady plodding onwards.

There are other significant biblical donkeys – not least the talking donkey in the wonderful story of Balaam, who sees angels when Balaam can’t, and the lost donkeys which are the means whereby Samuel meets with Saul and anoints him. But we need to come to that Biblical donkey we heard about on Sunday, and again just now. Here is Matthew telling the story of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, as a fulfilment of the prophecy of Zechariah. Matthew of course is so anxious to see that fulfilment that he tells the story in a somewhat impossible way – that the disciples put their cloaks on both the mother and young donkey, an animal that had never been ridden, and Jesus rides both – not a likely image. Matthew of course was misunderstanding Zechariah’s poetic parallelism – Hebrew poetry often says the same thing twice, in two ways, if you see what I mean and catch my meaning. So Zechariah only had one animal in mind. There may well have been the two animals – a young foal would walk alongside its mother to learn the trade, as it were, but wouldn’t have been the one Jesus rode. One scholar whose childhood had been on a farm said that if Jesus rode in on an unbroken donkey foal, it was probably his greatest miracle! The significance of the ‘unridden’ colt is that according to ancient tradition, no-one else can use a King’s animal. Maybe it had only been used for baggage before. But Mark and Matthew are anxious to point out this ‘first usage’ – so they must have had a reason, and the one I have just mentioned makes sense in the context of what they are trying to say about Jesus.

But the symbolism of the donkey is important. I said that in ancient times, everyone rode donkeys. But by the time of Jesus, a leader, a King, a General or whatever would never have dreamed of riding a donkey. He would ride a horse – perhaps not the huge war-horses of later years – but a much more macho animal which represented his power and authority. So although the crowd recognise the coming of a King, and greet him in that way, they find it is a King who comes in peace, not to fight. He comes on the people’s animal, not the ruler’s. Here, as with so many things, he identifies himself with the ordinary people, the have-nots. He may be a King, but he is a servant King. He is a donkey King, not a horse King – and that is a paradox that runs

through so much of what we have to face today. We talk of Christ reigning from the cross, of the triumph of the cross. And yet we see apparent defeat and suffering – well, not apparent, but real defeat and suffering. Yet he remains the King, as Pilate admits after he has questioned him – ‘So you are a king then?’ And Jesus tries to explain what *his* kind of Kingship is all about, and how different it is from the power-hungry kingship that people saw in secular rulers.

And maybe it is not too far-fetched to remember that donkeys are incredibly stubborn creatures. They have a mind their own, it seems, and will not be bullied. And is not that also part of the story of Jesus which comes to its inevitable conclusion today? People wanted Jesus to be another kind of King – someone who would drive the Romans out. He was under pressure from the days of the Temptations onwards to conform to other people’s expectations. He has continually to dig his heels in and refuse to compromise. Jesus was as stubborn as a donkey can be. He was determined to fulfil his calling. He had been saying that to his disciples as he prepared them for what was going to happen in Jerusalem. He ‘set his face towards Jerusalem’ – a phrase of huge determination.