

Bearing Christ

Palm/Passion Sunday

April 17, 2011

Matthew 21:1-11; 27:27-37

- ✦ Most people don't consider it a compliment to be compared to a donkey. The noted essayist, novelist, and literary lion G. K. Chesterton, author of the famous "Father Brown" detective stories, wrote a poem about a donkey that alludes to the donkey's ridiculous characteristics:

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 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.

- ✦ Let's face it, none of us wants to be called, well, *an ass*. But I would like to suggest that this humble creature has much to teach us about bearing Christ into the world.
- ✦ The scriptures for this Palm Sunday, whatever year they come in the lectionary, make a special point to call attention to this humble creature, the donkey. There is strong symbolic significance in his presence. Matthew takes great pains to underscore the point—somehow he ends up with two animals, but many scholars think that is just a textual misunderstanding, since the other gospels only speak of one.
- ✦ Matthew tells us that Jesus sends two of his disciples into the village of Bethphage to fetch a donkey and a colt. This is to fulfill what had been spoken by the prophet Zechariah, “Look, your king is coming to you,” said the prophet, “humble and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” Zech 9:9
- ✦ So Jesus enters Jerusalem as Zechariah had predicted, and a large crowd spreads cloaks and branches on the road in front of him. They greet him as their king, shouting “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!”
- ✦ It's a wonderful scene, one that I always loved as a kid, when we would march around the sanctuary of our large ornate church waving

- palms, having been warned not to put our neighbor's eye out, and singing: Hosanna, Hosanna, behold the king draws nigh. Hosanna, Hosanna, thousands of voices cry...Hosanna, Hosanna, our songs of praise we sing. Hosanna, Hosanna, to Christ the children's king.”
- ✦ And yet as I have grown older, Palm Sunday holds a bittersweet quality. Maybe it's because I have known more of life, and understand how fleeting triumph can be, how quickly joy can turn into grief. And maybe it's because I know the rest of story—that this is just the beginning of the greatest drama of all time—complete with evil villains, not so innocent bystanders, love, and betrayal.
 - ✦ And yes, a donkey. When you compare him to the rest of the characters, he turns out looking pretty good.
 - ✦ After all, the *disciples* are not particularly good Palm Sunday role models. For they may stand with Jesus now, but in a matter of days one will betray him and another will deny him. Their argument about who was the greatest was still ringing hot in their ears
 - ✦ In fact, all this talk about suffering and death on Jesus' part made them nervous. Their visions of regime change, led by Jesus (and them) began to seem like pipe dreams disappearing in the desert wind. And soon they will be nowhere to be found.
 - ✦ Then there are the *crowds*. They're curious, but not committed. Their loyalties can be bought and sold. They are shouting “hosanna to the Son of David” today, but soon they will reject Jesus and call for his death. New Testament scholar Eugene Boring points out that the members of the crowd *know* the truth about Jesus, but they cannot bring themselves to *do* the truth.

- ✦ Today the crowds seek entertainment, many flocking to grand mega-churches where Jesus is choreographed and stage-produced into a Hollywood hero just for them.
- ✦ Standing up to scrutiny even less well are the *religious leaders*. They are corrupt, mean-spirited, jealous, and self-interested. When Lazarus was raised from the dead, they conspired to put him right back in the tomb--where they thought he belonged.
- ✦ They offered and took bribes. They solicited false testimony. They created a bogus trial. They sent an innocent man to his death.
- ✦ Recently some magazine listed the top ten religious leaders of our day. With a few exceptions, it seemed to me that all were about drawing attention to themselves and their religious empires rather than feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and bringing the gospel of freedom to the poor.
- ✦ So that leaves us with—yes—the humble donkey. He can teach us a lot because he carries Christ into the streets, into the world. The donkey was a Christ-bearer or Christopher (Christophera, feminine). (comes from Greek Christos, pherein—carry)
- ✦ Today is a day to take that name—Christopher, Christophera—as our own. By doing so, we commit to carrying Christ into the world.
- ✦ When I was in seminary, I had a good friend, Judith, who is about my age. On the outside, Judith had a perfect life—four handsome grown children, a successful attorney husband, a big house. She had been drawn to be a local pastor in Wisconsin, and then to get her seminary degree.
- ✦ While in seminary, Judith was able to acknowledge the truth her seemingly perfect life concealed. Her husband had sexually abused

- her two daughters, and Judith admitted she had known this subconsciously all along, but had not been willing to confront him, lest her perfect world fall apart.
- ✦ With lots of help from God and caring friends and professionals, Judith left her seemingly ideal world and began a new life. She even changed her name. Rather than go back to her maiden name, she chose this one as her new last name: “Christopher,” Christ-bearer. She would now be Judith, Christ-bearer, complete with scars and wounds and still full of light.
 - ✦ Being Christopher, Christ-bearer, means serving Christ, even when it is a burden, serving humbly without caring who gets the glory. It means following Christ’s direction (not necessarily our own)—being willing to go where he wants us to go—even if it’s enemy territory.
 - ✦ It means not balking even when the crowds are noisy and there is much more that competes for our attention. It means being willing to shed a hero image like the one people wanted to pin on Jesus. It means being obedient to the will of the One who holds the reins—even when it means carrying a cross.
 - ✦ There’s another character in the drama that is about to unfold this week, another who will carry a great burden. Marilyn just read his story. He is one of the little-known parts of the story—Simon of Cyrene.
 - ✦ “As they went out, the scripture begins...” well what they had gone out from was the beating and scourging of Jesus, the stripping and mocking of him, the placing of a crown of thorns on his head. They were leading him away to crucify him.

- ✦ The scripture simply says that they came upon a man from Cyrene, named Simon; they compelled this man to carry the cross to Golgotha, presumably because Jesus was too weak to carry it by himself.
- ✦ Barrie Shepherd—*Faces at the Cross*, page 22.
- ✦ **That’s the word. God loves me. God loves you. Can I find a way to shape my days around that simple message he is dying to make live in me just now?**
- ✦ J. Barrie Shepherd sums up 35 years of preaching with these words, which are more real today than ever:
- ✦ "To put it at its simplest, we live with two realities, two towering cosmic facts that stare us in the face, dominate our living, either by their presence or their absence. The one is love, the other, death; and all the rest is strategy. Love, then, and death. And the question is, the question always is, the only question is, which one wins? Which one triumphs in the end? Which one is God?"
- ✦ What if we were to live as Christ-bearers in our family, in our church, in our community, in our world? It may not always be easy—it may mean our own version of the cross. It may mean standing up to the powers who glorify domination over non-violence; who advocate more for some at the cost of those who have the least.
- ✦ But we don’t have to bear Christ alone.
- ✦ Finally, a little parable: *The donkey awakened, his mind still savoring the afterglow of the most exciting day of his life. Never before had he felt such a rush of pleasure and pride. So he walked into town and found a group of people by the well. “I’ll let them know I’m here,” he thought. But they didn’t notice him. They went on drawing their water and paid him no mind.*

- ✦ *“Throw your garments down!” he said crossly. “Don’t you know who I am?” They just looked at him in amazement. And someone slapped him on the rump and told him to go home. “Miserable heathens” he muttered to himself. I’ll just go to the market where the good people are. They will remember me.” But nothing happened. No one paid any attention to him as he strutted down the street.*
- ✦ *“The palm branches!! Where are the palm branches? Yesterday you threw palm branches! Hurt and confused, the donkey returned home to his mother. “Foolish child,” she said gently. Don’t you realize that without him, you are just an ordinary donkey?”*
- ✦ When it becomes all about us, instead of lifting up Christ in ways that heal, and feed, and free, and love—life is often a burden.
- ✦ But with Christ guiding our path of service and grace, our ordinary life, our ordinary self, becomes sacred indeed.
- ✦ The question is, “can I find a way to shape my days around that simple message he is dying to make living in me just now?”
- ✦ **God loves me. God loves you. That’s the word. Even unto the cross.**
- ✦ **Amen.**