

“The Donkey King”

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Sixth in a Lent series on John 12

John 12:12-19

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Please read the Scripture by clicking [here](#).

In ancient Rome, when a general such as Julius Caesar won a great victory, he was awarded a victory parade through Rome. Defeated enemies, captured weapons, and looted treasures would lead the general and his legions before adoring and thankful crowds. They called this victory parade a “*triumph*.” More wars of glory still awaited, but Rome’s greatness was celebrated.

Barb and I just watched the movie *Long Walk to Freedom*. It’s about Nelson Mandela. One memorable scene, among many, is when Mandela walks from prison, free after 27 years. I remember when that happened. It was a moment of victory. Much struggle still lay ahead, but the tide had turned. This was Madela’s triumph!

At the end of August 1944, General Charles de Gaulle led a large crowd walking through Paris. Along with the Americans, his French forces had just liberated the city from Nazi occupation. After four long years, people could again sing *La Marseillaise* on city streets, waving *La Tricolore*. Much fighting still lay ahead, but clearly the war was being won. It was de Gaulle’s triumph!

De Gaulle paraded *after* Paris was liberated. Mandela paraded *after* he was free. Caesar paraded *after* the victory. Jesus parades into Jerusalem *before*. His triumph has not happened. His glory waits ahead. The battle is just beginning.

II

People are excited. They are on edge. They are filled with hope. And it is dangerous.

The Passover celebration is just a few days away. Jerusalem is already packed, and the pressure is increasing. Passover is very religious. It celebrates God, who set Israel free from slavery. Passover is very political. To set Israel free, God battled an empire and won. Passover is independence day (eight days actually). In Jesus time, it’s being celebrated in a place that is not independent, and is longing to be free.

The security presence is extra-heavy. Rebels called *zealots* are ready to spread violence. Even the Roman governor—Rome is the occupying power—Pontius Pilate has come to supervise in case things turn ugly. It’s like gasoline has spilled all over.

Is Jesus the match? Word about him has spread. They’re saying he raises the dead. In the hopeful anticipation of God’s People, Resurrection is a sure sign that God’s kingdom has come. Is this the time? Is Jesus the King, the Messiah of God?

People start waving palm branches. Palm branches are like flags. This is not the first time in Israel's story that they've waved palm branches aloft to celebrate an uprising.¹ Palms are banners of freedom.

People start shouting: "*Hosanna!*" That means "Save us now!" You know the roadside-sign shouting "Ye must be saved!" That message is true enough. But if your country is being ruled as a prison, salvation means a break-out. "Save us" is a call to rebellion.

I've noticed that some of the most common songs we sing on Palm Sunday prominently feature children.² We often have our children parade around the sanctuary, waving palm branches and shouting "*Hosanna!*" If we take seriously what that cry means and what the palm branches were about, we'd realize that we are tutoring our children in the ways of revolution. That might not be a bad thing.

Their shouting continues: "*Blessed in the one who comes in the name of the Lord!*" That's from a psalm Jews sing at festivals.³ But this time they add to it. They see Jesus and proclaim: "*The king of Israel!*"⁴ Proclaiming someone "King!" is, of course, very political. When there is already someone on the throne, it's very dangerous too.

Remember, it's like gas is spilled all over. The air is electric with fumes. The match is ready. Will he strike?

III

No one expects a donkey.

Sure, Jesus is an ordinary working guy, the sort who would ride a donkey.⁵ I'm quite sure, though, that if Jesus wants a tall, muscular horse to bear him on the occasion, he could have got one. Instead, he chooses to go donkey riding.⁶

¹ Gary Burge says that "When the temple was rededicated during the Maccabean era, palms were used in the celebration (1 Macc. 13:15; 2 Macc. 10:7). . . . During both major wars with Rome, reliefs of palms were stamped on the coins minted by the rebels. Thus this act of celebration [with palms] is by no means neutral. [The palm] symbolizes Israel's national hopes, now focused on Jesus, being hailed as he enters the city." Quoted in Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John, A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 709.

² In the *Voices United* hymn book, for instance, see #122 ("All Glory, Laud and Honour"), #123 ("Hosanna, Loud Hosanna"), #124 ("He Came Riding on a Donkey"), #126 ("Ride On, Ride On, the Time is Right"), and #162 ("The Glory of Our King"). This is remarkable, because none of the Gospels talk about children when they describe Jesus' parade into Jerusalem. Has turning this into a "children's story" kicked the teeth out of the episode?

³ Psalm 118:25-26. This is one of the Hallel Psalms. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hallel>

⁴ Bruner, 706. Again he quotes Gary Burge: "This] departs considerably from [the Psalm's] intent. Suddenly we gain the impression that the crowds are greeting a national liberator." Bruner, 709.

⁵ U. Wilckens said the donkey was the "riding animal of the little man." (Quoted in Bruner, 710.)

⁶ In John's account of these events, he gives the sense that a donkey happened to be nearby and Jesus used it (see verse 14). He seems to be reacting to the crowd's enthusiasm for revolution (Bruner 709).

Donkeys are nice. Not glamorous, though. Not terribly impressive. If you are an ancient general, unleashing a massed cavalry charge of men on donkeys is not likely to bring victory. If you want to inspire your people with your majesty, perching on a donkey will be underwhelming.

Imagine if Mandela had left prison on a skateboard? Or De Gaulle had wheeled through Paris on a moped. Or Caesar had celebrated his triumph through Rome . . . well, on a donkey.

Jesus' supporters are eager for inspiration and victory. He's the match, about to light the fire! But Jesus rides a donkey.

IV

What sort of revolution is this guy leading? What sort of campaign has he strategized? What sort of battle awaits? What kind of politics is this?

The prophet Zechariah wrote something about a donkey, centuries before Jesus.⁷ The Gospel-writer John wants us to remember it when we see Jesus on the donkey.⁸ I read it to begin our worship.

The prophet was talking about the coming of the king, who would rebuild the Temple, restore the people, and return God's Kingdom. Listen. What does this say about Jesus?

*He is righteous and victorious.
He is humble and riding on a [donkey],
on a colt, the offspring of a donkey.
He will cut off the chariot from [Israel]
and the warhorse from Jerusalem.
The bow used in battle will be cut off;
he will speak peace to the nations.
His rule will stretch from sea to sea,
and from the river to the ends of the earth.*

That's God's Word, through Zechariah the prophet.

In the accounts in Matthew, Mark and Luke's Gospels, the procurement of a donkey (or two) for the day has been clearly thought out. This does not preclude, however, that Jesus chose a donkey to undermine the nationalistic fervour he knew was gathering around him.

⁷ Zechariah 9:9-10. All Bible quotes are from the *Common English Bible*.

⁸ John's Gospel made two changes to Zechariah's prophecy. Zechariah said, "Look! Your king will come to you!" John changed this to, "Look! Your king is coming." (Emphasis added). Also, Zechariah began with "Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion. Sing aloud, Daughter Jerusalem." John changed it to, "Don't be afraid, daughter of Zion." With the revolutionary fervour in the air, and especially knowing what was to happen to Jesus, "Don't be afraid," is especially appropriate.

The waiting is over. The new, final and everlasting king for God's People is here. King Jesus is bringing revolution. He is upsetting the way the world works.

King Jesus' rebellion does not deliver violence, though. He receives it. His battle is not the sort that gets written in the histories of empires and nations, of kings and generals. His politics are the way of peace.

V

A couple of centuries later, far from Jerusalem in Rome itself, there was a boarding school. On a wall someone carved graffiti.

It's of someone, his hand raised in worship. Underneath is rudely scrawled: "*Alexamenos sebetai theon*"; "Alexamenos worshiHe is worshipping a man with a donkey's head, being crucified.

Alexamenos was probably a boy at the school. His classmates were teasing him. He was a Christian. He worshipped Jesus who was crucified.

This might be the earliest drawing of Jesus we have. It's Jesus crucified. It's Jesus as a donkey.

VI

To the world—the world of Jerusalem in Jesus' day, the world of Rome in Alexamenos' time, and our world today—the way of Jesus is worth mocking. A king triumphantly parading on a donkey is foolish. A victory won on a cross is insane. A politics of peace is a pleasant thought, but get serious!

Except this is the hope of the world. The only hope for the world. The King we honour, the Messiah who saves us, our God who has come to us, rides a donkey. He goes to a cross. He accepts being the object of mockery, the butt of jokes, easily dismissed and derided. As for those who do this, he dies to save them too.

The palms we got today, they are flags of revolution. They herald the uprising that will save the world. They are twisted into a cross. Jesus' triumph!

At the end of today's reading, some of Jesus enemies said, "*Look! The whole world is following him!*" On the face of it, they didn't have much to worry about. By the end of the week, Jesus would be dead and buried, his movement crushed and the crowds dispersed. More deeply and truthfully, the Pharisees' did not really know what they were talking about. If only they were right. May they be right.