

Who Is This?

The Palm Sunday Sermon presented by The Rev. Philip A. Rodgers, April 9, 2017
at Trinity United Church in Malton, related to Matthew 21:1-11

As a minister of long standing, I realize that I can sometimes be too preachy and at other times too teachy – but always there is the underlying motive to enlighten and enrich our understanding of the faith, especially at highly spotlighted events like Palm Sunday. Enlightened understanding is high on my agenda today.

Bystanders watching that comic parade asked: “Who is this silly man – riding a donkey?” They didn’t know. That dumb donkey knew! In his poem “*The Donkey*” poet [G. K. Chesterton](#) speaks the inner thoughts of the donkey Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday:

*With monstrous head and sickening cry
And ears like errant wings,
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.*

Matthew curiously gives us a lot of details about the procurement of Jesus’ donkey. Anyone familiar with the book of Zechariah would immediately recognize why this is so. Zechariah in Chapter 9 says, “*Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, **humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.** He will **cut off the chariot** from Ephraim **and the war horse** from Jerusalem; and the **battle bow shall be cut off**, and he shall **command peace** to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River [Euphrates] to the ends of the earth.”*

Now, let’s clear up something that strikes us as odd with Matthew’s rendering of Palm Sunday. You may not have caught it, but I did: in Matthew’s version it sounds like Jesus rode in of both beasts at the same time, straddling two animals like some circus act. So what’s going on here? And who this who rides two beasts at the same time? In Matthew’s defense, Zechariah said that the prophesied one would come “on a donkey, *and* on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” Any Hebrew scholar could tell you that Zechariah was simply speaking poetically using Semitic parallelism, which was commonly used to describe the same object in two different ways.

On this point, New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan has recently sought to debunk the argument that Matthew was a scriptural literalist who altered Mark's story to the absurd length of Jesus riding in on two animals at the same time in order to conform to Matthew's misreading of Zechariah. Instead, Crossan proposes what I believe to be a much more compelling interpretation of Matthew. Crossan writes that Matthew: "wants two animals, a donkey with her little colt beside her, and that Jesus rides "them" in the sense of having them both as part of his demonstration's highly visible symbolism. More simply put, Jesus does not ride a stallion or a mare, a mule or a male donkey, and not even a female donkey. He rides the most unmilitary mount imaginable: a female nursing donkey with her little colt trotting along beside her. Crossan finds this reading compelling because Jesus riding an *unmilitary* mount matches the rest of the Zechariah prophecy — that the one who comes riding on a humble donkey into Jerusalem will nonviolently bring peace. Remember the language from Zechariah about "cutting off the chariot, war horse, and bow commanding peace."

So much for Donald Trump's solution to Syria's Civil war with over 50 Tomahawk Missiles aimed at a strategic airport in Syria this past week. There just has to be a better way and we have to find that way soon or we are doomed as a civilization? And I know I sound like a Monday morning quarterback in many ways with my lampooning Donald Trump and my shallow, uninformed judgments on highly complicated global issues, which are just too easy to criticize for words.

Not the case in Matthew's account of Palm Sunday though. No Monday morning quarterbacking here. The next morning, Jesus continued the trajectory that had begun with his unusual entry to Jerusalem when he overturned the tables in the Temple to interrupt, if only briefly, business as usual. As indicated by the odd symbolism of the fig tree that follows this week's Gospel lesson, Jesus' issue was that the current religious and political establishment of his day, like the troublesome fig tree, was not bearing fruit. Suddenly, we find Jesus making broad, increasingly public and controversial demonstrations on the big stage of Jerusalem in the middle of Passover (the height of the pilgrimage season) in contrast to merely making controversial teachings in the small towns and villages around Galilee.

I do not think that Jesus wanted to die, but his passion for justice and his anger at injustice — a passion and anger he inherited from the Hebrew prophets before him — led him to take increasingly large risks to show the contrast between the status quo (where Herod was king) and the *kingdom* of God. These risks led directly to Jesus' tragic death. This claim is not to say that following Jesus necessarily means we will die a tragic death ourselves for being faithful. There are those like St. Francis of Assisi, Clarence Jordan, and Nelson Mandela who followed Jesus in radical, controversial ways and died of old age. But there are also those like Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Gandhi who — like Jesus — were killed when they risked following Jesus' way.

Similarly, theologian John Mabry has written that African-American heroine Rosa Parks who would not go to the back of the bus, is an imitator of Christ, not because she suffered for taking her stand (or keeping her seat, in her case), but because she had the courage to believe in her own dignity and fought for it in spite of the conflict that resulted. Nelson Mandela is an imitator of Christ, not because he suffered in prison, but because he held out for equality, peace and justice, and led a nation to abandon apartheid. Mother Teresa is an imitator of Christ, not because she gave up her life for the poor in India, but because she had a vision of a better, a Godly world. In each case it is not the suffering that is redemptive, but the courage to pursue, through non-violent ways: peace, justice and goodness in the face of pain and evil.

As we prepare to enter Holy Week, may Matthew's story of Palm Sunday continues to haunt us, to challenge us today, to follow Jesus' way for such as time as this.