

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Philippians 2:5-11

Psalms 118:1-2, 19-29

Mark 11:1-11

Sermon for March 24, 2024

THE DONKEY

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.

I've been thinking about Jimmy Carter lately. He's now 99 years old, and entered himself into hospice care a year or so ago, and we of course also know that Rosalynn, his wife, passed away recently.

Jimmy Carter had an interesting presidency. It only lasted one term, and his four years in office were marked by some significant accomplishments like the Camp David accords, as well as some unfortunate developments, most centering around the taking of American hostages by the new Iranian regime.

But the image that stands out most in my own mind is of what took place on his first day in office, back on January 20 of 1977. That was what we call Inauguration Day, and all previous newly-elected Presidents of recent history, after having taken the oath of office on the Capitol rotunda, had then ridden in grand style with their wives in the presidential limousine from the Capitol Building to the White House.

But Jimmy and Rosalynn, decided that instead of riding in the limousine, they would walk the entire one and a half mile distance, along with their nine year-old daughter, Amy. The other new Presidents since then have followed suit, but the image that stays with me is of that first occasion, of Jimmy and his wife and daughter walking hand in hand down Pennsylvania Avenue, waving to the great crowds lined up along the route. On that first occasion, it really seemed like something new, something important, a gesture that carried meaning over and above the simple celebration of victory.

Carter later wrote in his diary that by walking during the inaugural parade he wished to convey his "confidence...in the people of our country" and "a reduction

in the imperial status of the president and his family.”¹⁰ That is to say, he wanted to convey in a symbolic way that the President’s primary job is not to lead the people, not to command the people...but to serve the people.

And that’s the same meaning, I think, that Jesus wanted to convey in his entry into Jerusalem at the beginning of Holy week that we read about in our gospel selection for today. So let’s read it together.

Mark 11:1-11

Mark 11:1-11

11:1 When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples

11:2 and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it.

11:3 If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'"

11:4 They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it,

11:5 some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?"

11:6 They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it.

11:7 Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it.

11:8 Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields.

11:9 Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

11:10 Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

11:11 Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

Over five centuries before the time of Jesus, a man named Zachariah wrote a prophetic document that soon entered into the Hebrew Scriptures, and with which Jesus and all His contemporaries would have been familiar. Zachariah was writing during a time in which Israel had just begun to rebuild itself out of the devastation it had experienced at the hand of other, stronger countries; and like other prophets writing during this same time frame, Zachariah coupled success in this new birth of Israel with a return of the nation to its ancient dedication to God, and to God's ways.

One of the images Zachariah used to link these two – worldly renewal and spiritual repentance – is very striking, and almost certainly was in Christ's mind when he planned the ceremony surrounding his entry into Jerusalem that day. Let me read it to you.

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Behold, your King is coming to you;
He *is* just and having salvation,
Lowly and riding on a donkey,
A colt, the foal of a donkey. (Zachariah 9: 9)

“Humble and mounted on a donkey, A colt, the foal of a donkey. ” A king, riding on a young donkey. It's a simple and yet rich image, isn't it? And to those familiar with the Old Testament, it perfectly illustrates a theme that has run through many of the other great prophetic writers. Over and over again, in different ways and in different poetic images, they seemed to link their country's restoration with its acceptance, even its embrace, of humility.

Thus in our reading for today from Isaiah, the prophet is describing a similar agent of restoration when he says:

*I gave my back to those who strike
And my cheeks to those who pull out the beard.
I hid not my face
From disgrace and spitting.*

And a little later, Isaiah writes of him:

*He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
Yet he opened not his mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
And like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
So he opened not his mouth.*

So we begin to understand why Jesus chose to ride a young donkey into Jerusalem at the beginning of that fateful week, why he had even made arrangements beforehand to provide that humble beast: he was deliberately associating himself with that ancient prophesy, and with what it represented: a connection between rebirth and a return to God and God's ways.

But now here's the difference between Jesus and those ancient prophecies. They had all been concerned with the rebirth and renewal of an earthly kingdom, the kingdom of Israel, through its reform and recommitment to the ways of God as the way back to its superiority over the other nations of the earth.

What Jesus was instead symbolizing by riding that little donkey into Jerusalem was much deeper, and much more universal than those ancient prophets could have imagined. His gesture was not meant just for a fallen nation, but for a fallen humanity, or more correctly, for every individual seeking to reestablish his or her relationship with God in a way that would allow, not for elevation over others, but for elevation in the esteem of God.

And how is that to be accomplished?

My suggestion is that Jesus did not choose this particular way of announcing Himself as the Messiah in order to teach us that kings should be humble; given our fallen human nature, that lesson could so easily, in us, turn into false humility, into humble bragging. What Jesus was teaching us, I believe, was the true meaning of kingship. His point was to draw attention, not to Himself, but to the donkey. His point was not to give us a different understanding of the King; it was to change our understanding of the simple beast of burden.

Christ is always about reversing things, but not in the sense of exchanging positions. He's about reversing things in the sense of changing our perception of them. When he points to children as role models for us, when he pronounces his blessing on the meek and the poor in spirit, when he reaches out to the downtrodden and the disenfranchised and the outsiders, when he promises that the first will be last and the last first, it is not a promise that these will be elevated above the proud and the haughty and the rich. It is not a promise that wealth will be redistributed in heaven. It is a promise that our perception of what counts as wealth will be changed.

Jesus came to show us God's face. He came to describe for us God's Kingdom, the kingdom where God reigns. And in that kingdom, it's not the proud, prancing, royally decorated stallion that is honored to carry the King: it's the humble, patient, sturdy beast of burden that is honored to carry the King.

When Jimmy Carter took that walk down Pennsylvania Avenue, hand-in-hand with Rosalynn and little Amy, I think he was making the same point, and perhaps, as the most deeply committed Christian we've had to serve in the office of president in our lifetimes, perhaps he even had the example of Jesus in mind. He wasn't de-elevating the office; he was inviting us to reflect on what true leadership looks like, in God's eyes.

And so, Father, we take the opportunity this morning to ask You to guide us and strengthen us as we seek Your face. We need Your guidance and strength because on our own, we will certainly succumb to the temptation to regard wealth, reputation, power, comfort, publicity as the treasures to be most diligently pursued. Open our eyes to what's real and what isn't. Write that on our hearts, Father, so that we remember it each time we think about Our Lord and Savior riding to His final destination, the resurrection into heaven, on the back of a humble, patient, and sturdy little donkey, and we pray for these things in Jesus' own holy name, the name that is above all others, and yet beneath all of our own. Amen.