

HUMILITY (3/20/16)

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Isaiah 50: 4-9, Psalm 31: 9-16, Philippians 2: 5-11, Luke 19: 28-40

We're going to talk this morning about humility, and of course you've heard about the minister who said he had a wonderful sermon about humility prepared but was waiting for a large crowd before delivering it. A pretty good example of not practicing what you preach.

What brings up the topic of humility is of course because in today's Gospel passage, we're told how when our Lord made his entrance into Jerusalem about a week before his crucifixion, he chose to do so riding on the back of a young donkey.

Now whatever the good qualities of donkeys are, being dignified is not among them, largely because of their size and those big ears, I expect. At the beginning of one of the Clint Eastwood spaghetti westerns, he rides into a dusty little western town on a donkey without a saddle...and it looks funny because his feet hanging down on either side of the donkey are almost touching the ground. It's meant to be a comical image, and it works because it **is** a comical image.

We can find the essence of what it is to be a donkey in Winnie the Pooh – which by the way is a pretty good place to look to find the essence of what it is to be anything. Eeyore of course is the melancholy donkey, and he's melancholy for a good reason: Because he's a donkey. He reaches to one of his deep truths when he's examining his tail one day. It's an ugly, bedraggled thing, not much of a tail by the standard of animal tails. But Eeyore studies it for a while, then sighs and says, "It's not much of a tail, but I'm sort of attached to it."

The writers of the Old Testament themselves appreciate this sort of sad but semi-comical aspect of the donkey. Typically they use the donkey to represent the earthy, unspiritual aspects of creation. When you read about donkeys being saddled in the Old Testament, always get ready, because the author is signaling

that we are about to suppress – to saddle – the ordinary, and move into the realm of the extraordinary.

And so it was with Zechariah, one of the lesser prophets of the Old Testament. Zechariah is one of those prophets that probably no one – outside of a few Bible scholars – would ever pay any attention to, except for the fact that the Lord Jesus chose to ride a donkey into Jerusalem that day.

And why did that make such a difference.? Because about 500 years before that day, Zechariah wrote a few verses in the middle of his various prophecies, and it's probably to make reference to those verses that Jesus decided on that day to ride a donkey on his way into Jerusalem.

Before I read those verses to you, let me fill in a little background, so that we know what Zechariah was writing about.

In 586 B.C., the Babylonians completed the conquest of what had been the regional kingdom of Judah. They captured Jerusalem and brought much of the ruling class of the country back to Babylon, and kept them there in captivity. After about fifty years, Babylon itself was defeated, and the new conquerors, the Persians, let the captive Jews return to their country, and encouraged them to rebuild their capital city, Jerusalem.

The rebuilding of Jerusalem was a drawn-out and complicated affair and it often seemed hopeless. And the difficulty of that – of rebuilding Jerusalem – was really a symbol of the difficulty of the situation Judah itself faced, since it had now been greatly reduced in size and influence, and was now just one small vassal state among many others in that particular geographical region.

It was into that situation that Zechariah offered his prophecies. Following a template common to many of the Biblical writers, his prophecies basically had two fundamental claims. The first was that the terrible hardships and defeats that Judah had suffered were due to the country's own moral and religious shortcomings. And second, that in the foreseeable future, Judah would be restored to and even exceed its former status as a significant power among the surrounding nations, as long as it also reformed itself in the spiritual point of view.

But what makes Zechariah's prophecies especially interesting, and what clearly drew our Lord's attention to him, were a few verses where Zechariah is describing the individual who will apparently be the agent of this transformation, the one who will revive the nation, and lead it back to its position of preeminence. Listen to what he says about this man:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Behold, your king is coming to you,
Righteous and having salvation is he,
Humble and mounted on a donkey,
On a colt, the foal of a donkey.

"Humble and mounted on a donkey." A king, riding on a 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 suffering and 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.

And in the same vein, the author of the Psalm we read together this morning wrote:

Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress;
My eye is wasted from grief; my soul and my body also,
For my life is spent with sorrow,
And my years with sighing;
My strength fails because of my iniquity
And my bones waste away.

So we understand why Our Lord chose to ride a donkey into Jerusalem that day. He was making a statement. He was saying: "I am the King; I am the one who will restore moral order. I am the one who will bring healing and new birth. But I will not do it through force. I will not raise armies to impose my will. I will not raise myself, so that I can impose my will on you. On the contrary. I will lower myself until I'm on the lowest level you recognize, and invite you to join me down here."

But here's where our passage becomes even more interesting. Luke records that Our Lord's disciples were proclaiming the coming of the Messiah, using a variation of a traditional phrase found many places in the Old Testament: "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!" And according to Luke, there were some Pharisees, some Bible teachers, in the crowd, and they of course recognized the image Jesus was using, as they also recognized the phrase that our Lord's disciples were crying out, and they objected. They muscled their way through the crowd and went up to Jesus, sitting on his donkey, and they said: "Teacher, rebuke your disciples."

And in response, our Lord says something. Like everything else he says that we have any record of, what he says here is unexpected. It's unexpected and mysterious. Not difficult, but mysterious.

He says, "If these were silent (meaning his disciples), the very stones would cry out."

Why do I call this a mysterious response? Because it seems almost to undermine the whole point of the imagery that Our Lord is invoking here: the imagery of a humble king, riding on a donkey. It might seem as if Jesus is saying that if His

disciples didn't point at him and praise him and acknowledge Him as King, that nature itself would do so, meaning that the appointed time for acknowledging Christ has King has now arrived, and nothing could prevent its proclamation..

And that in fact is the way many of the commentators on this passage do take it. They say what the whole episode is about Jesus at last revealing Himself as king. The disciples putting their cloaks on the donkey and spreading them on the road, waving their palm fronds in the air... all of that is to symbolize their subservience. In other words, the symbolism of the whole episode, for them, is about the elevation of Jesus into the role of King, an elevation so irresistible that the stones themselves must be forced to acknowledge it.

Now although that's certainly one way of looking at it, my own reading is different. My own focus remains stuck on that homely little donkey. The symbolism Our Lord chose to use to me is not about His own elevation to Kingship; it is about the revelation of what true kingship is.

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. What's different about that Kingdom? Not that some have been booted out of office and replaced by others.

What's different is that eyes have been opened, and those who once were blind now can see.

What can they see? They can see that acts of charity, of meekness, of humility, of sacrifice are the true treasures

And why are they the true treasures? Because they are in harmony with, and mirror, God's own nature. They are in harmony with reality, God's reality, which is the true reality.

When Our Lord rode that donkey into Jerusalem that day, I think that's what He was illustrating. He wasn't saying, Look at me. I'm the King, but I'll be a humble King. I won't lord it over you. He was saying something much deeper than that.

He was saying, Look at this donkey. If your eyes are open, you'll see that this donkey – what this donkey represents – **is** kingly, is the **true** reality of kingliness.

And when in response to the Pharisees' suggestion that he rebuke His disciples, Our Lord says that if he were to do so, the rocks themselves would take up the proclamation, He's making the same point. Rocks can't lie. They always reflect reality as it actually is, not as we imagine it to be.

You've heard about the man who thought he could fly. He thought he had superpowers and was utterly convinced he could fly, not a doubt in his mind about it, until he stepped off the roof of the ten-story building, and fell like a stone.

And just so, meekness, forgiveness ...all the things the donkey represents, and especially humility, carrying someone else without making a show of it ...these **are** the noble characteristics of the true reality.

That's what Christ is teaching us, I believe. He wasn't elevating himself to kingship. He was elevating the donkey.

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 on the back of a funny little donkey. Amen.