

## THE TALE OF TWO DONKEYS

The day that we know of as Palm Sunday, came just a couple of days before the Jewish Passover festival, an event that meant that the city of Jerusalem would be extraordinarily busy.

People would flock to the city from the countryside, just to be there, and some would make the journey from foreign parts to add to the numbers.

In other words, Jerusalem was heaving.

And for that very reason the Roman authorities would have sent for reinforcements to help ensure that there would be no trouble during this time.

Extra officers, centurions and soldiers would come into the city.

And this would not be done surreptitiously or quietly at night – this would be done with the most fuss possible.

The soldiers would march into the city in broad daylight. It would be a full scale military parade, with all their equipment and finery, bristling with armour and weapons, done not simply because soldiers like parades, but in order to remind the people of who was really in charge.

It was ironic really, because the Passover Festival is the one where the people of Israel remembered their deliverance from slavery in Egypt.

And the Romans were saying in effect – well you can have your festival if you like, but right now Rome is the new Egypt, and Caesar is the new Pharaoh.

The message was - you might be in your own land today, but we are in control of you.

This military spectacle, this impressive entrance into the city gates would have been fresh in the minds of all the people in Jerusalem when Jesus makes *his* appearance in the city.

Now Jesus' ride into town might not have been exactly planned with military precision, but it certainly *was* planned.

The word had got out that he was coming.

People were there waiting for him to greet him. They were there ready to throw down cloaks and wave palm branches.

And the exchange between the disciples and the donkey owner makes it clear that Jesus must have made a prior arrangement with this man.

So Jesus is embarking on something very public. He's not just slipping into the city. He is not trying to sneak into town without being seen.

No. Jesus is coming in to the capital in a very open and dramatic way.

And that's unusual for Jesus, because for most of the time, even in the relatively remote countryside, his fame seems to be something that he shies away from.

He's always trying to get people to keep quiet about him, always trying to find a place where he can get away from the crowds, always trying to find remote spots where he can get some peace. But now, as he approaches the busiest place of all, it's time to be very open and very public.

And so Jesus has his own parade as he enters the packed city of Jerusalem.

And for those with eyes to see, his parade is filled with symbolic meaning.  
 He is coming into town as the king.  
 But a king like no other.  
 He's not the kind of king the Romans might be half-expecting.  
 And he's not the kind of king many of his own people are expecting either.

Now everyone knows the story of how Jesus chooses to come into town riding on a donkey. We all know that, don't we?

But did you notice anything strange about our two readings today?  
 Mark is quite straightforward. He says Jesus sends two disciples ahead for a donkey that they will find tied up on the street. They bring the donkey to Jesus and he rides the beast into town.

But Matthew says that the two disciples are to get a donkey **and** a young colt.  
 The two are then brought to Jesus.  
 Matthew says, *"The disciples did what Jesus had told them to do; they brought the donkey and the colt, threw their cloaks over them, and Jesus got on."*  
 (Matthew 21:6)

So Jesus got on? To both of them....?  
 I have a picture of Jesus riding into Jerusalem like a circus performer.  
 He's got one foot on each beast.  
 And somehow I don't think that is likely.

So why does Matthew write this?  
 He believes that Jesus is deliberately trying to fulfil a biblical prophesy that is found in the book of Zechariah. Here is what it says.

*"Rejoice, people of Zion! Shout for joy, you people of Jerusalem!  
 Look, your king is coming to you!  
 He comes triumphant and victorious, but humble and riding on a donkey – and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.  
 The Lord says 'I will remove the war chariots from Israel, and take the warhorses from Jerusalem. The bows used in battle will be destroyed. Your king will make peace among the nations'."*

(Zechariah 9:9-10)

Zechariah said that the prophesied one would come "on a donkey, *and* on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

Now any Hebrew scholar would tell you that Zechariah was simply speaking poetically using Semitic parallelism, which was commonly used to describe the same thing in two different ways.

Much of the Hebrew text in the Old Testament is written in different styles of

poetry and one of the forms is parallelism, where one line is echoed in the next line.

Now I'm sure that everyone here is well aware of this (!), but just in case here is an example.

Psalm 78 begin with these two lines

*Listen, my people, to my teaching*

*And pay attention to what I say,*

'Listen', 'pay attention' – just two ways of saying the same thing...

Then we have...

*God gave laws to the people of Israel*

*and commandments to the descendents of Jacob.*

(Psalm 78: 1,5a)

Its not that God gave laws to one group of people and different commandments to another.

It's two ways of saying the same thing.

Now I know just what you are going to say next..... "Groucho Marx!"

Did Groucho Marx not make a joke based on this in the film '*Horsefeathers*' where he is being installed as the Principle of Huxley College?

You are right.

In his opening speech he includes this...

*"I remember the day my son left for school, a mere boy and a beardless youth. I kissed them both goodbye."*

(Groucho Marx: *Horsefeathers*)

The joke of course is that the 'mere boy' and the 'beardless youth' are the same person - not two different people.

What some Bible scholars think, is that Matthew (who would be reading the Hebrew Bible in a Greek translation) took Zechariah's words literally, and thought if Zechariah said that Jesus rode two animals into Jerusalem then that's what Jesus must have done!

The historical Jesus scholar John Dominic Crossan however comes to Matthew's aid here by suggesting that what Matthew is doing is adding extra details to the story. Crossan reckons Matthew isn't so daft as to suggest that Jesus actually rode on both donkeys at once, but that both were included as part of the procession.

Here's what Crossan says;

*"There are two animals, a donkey with her little colt beside her, and Jesus rides "them" in the sense of having them both as part of his demonstration's highly visible symbolism. In other words, 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."*

(J D Crossan: *First Light: Jesus and the Kingdom*, Study Guide Notes)

This would seem to make most sense as Jesus riding an *unmilitary* mount matches the rest of the Zechariah prophecy — the idea that the one who comes riding on a humble donkey into Jerusalem will non-violently bring peace. Remember the language from Zechariah about “removing the chariot, war horse, and bow to command peace.”

This interpretation is even more convincing when you consider that military parades into Jerusalem would have been exactly the opposite of what Mark, Matthew, and Zechariah described. The military leader would not have come nonviolently on a humble donkey to cut off the chariot, warhorse, and bow; but would have come *riding* a chariot with a warhorse and *wielding* a bow or other weapons, and his men would be armed to the teeth.

(Carl Gregg: Patheos, Jesus Subversive Donkey Ride)

The point about Palm Sunday is that Jesus has set up the whole scene for a reason.

This is a parody of a Roman military parade. It’s a send up, if you like.

Jesus is making a joke about Rome and pointing out that his values are oh so different.

As for his own people, well not many of *them* were thinking much about Zechariah.

They were thinking only of their present situation, and hoping that the Messiah would be the one to restore their nationhood and drive out the Romans. They were hoping for a violent solution.

And Jesus wants to bring home to them, that his mission is different. This parade of his isn’t just a spoof, it isn’t just about making fun of Rome – it’s got a serious side – indicating differences between the kingdoms of this world, and the kingdom of God.

So Jesus comes into town on a donkey and there’s no impressive warhorse to be seen.

He doesn’t gaze down on them all from a position of authority.

In fact he is so low down that his feet are almost dragging on the ground.

Jesus doesn’t come in as one to exert authority over people but as one who humbly rejects domination over others.

He comes in not as a mighty warrior but as one who is vulnerable and who refuses to resort to violence.

His ‘army’ consists of a rag tag group of some fishermen, tax collectors, some vaguely disreputable women and other peasants.

Jesus is like a jester enacting in a humorous march a different way of understanding “rule” and invites people to see the world and what matters most in a new light.

There *will* be a crown – but not the kind of crown anyone was expecting.

There *will* indeed be a great victory – the enemy will be defeated –

but not the enemy - or the (victory) anyone expected.

Once again Jesus is turning expectations upside down.

His life is lived in an upside down way.

This is the message of Palm Sunday.

And if we are followers of his, we seriously have to be prepared for surprises too.

We also need to be ready to march to a different beat.

How could we possibly imagine that this radical, upside-down way of Jesus is

supposed to bypass us if we are trying to be his followers?

How can we truly be Christ's people if this new and alternative way of looking at the world isn't part of *our* thinking, and if Jesus' beliefs do not inform our own?

The challenge of this day is to remember that we in the Christian Community are called to follow.

Think of words that people will often associate with church – boring, staid, traditional, safe, predictable, undemanding, inflexible.

Was Jesus ever *any* of that?

If these words are ever true of any church it shows how far that church needs to travel.

When everything that we do as Christians or as church fits in nicely with society and expectations and rocks no boats - then we can be sure we are getting it wrong.

On the other hand, if we are prepared to be adventurous, daring, alternative and ready to look at the world in a different way, seeking to see things like Christ (despite the scorn and opposition), then we may just be starting to get it right.

(Zechariah 9:9-10)

Matthew 21:1-11

Mark 11:1-10

March 29 2015 (Palm Sunday)