

## Sermon for Palm Sunday, 2021

(Palm Liturgy Mt 21:1-11) Zechariah 9:9-12. Philippians 2:5-11. Psalm 45:2-7.  
Matthew 27:1-54.

**The Collect:** Almighty and everlasting God, who, of thy tender love towards mankind, has sent thy Son our Saviour Jesus Christ to take upon him our flesh and to suffer death upon the cross, that all mankind should follow the example of his great humility: mercifully grant that we may both follow the example of his patience, and also be made partakers of his resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Zechariah 9: 9 (KJV) ‘Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass.’

Zechariah 9:9 (Literal Standard Version) Rejoice exceedingly, O daughter of Zion, Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem, “Behold, your King comes to you, righteous and having salvation, afflicted—and riding on a donkey, and on a colt—a son of female donkeys.”

Judges 5:10 (Literal Standard Version) ‘You who ride on white donkeys, sitters on a long robe, and you who walk by the way, meditate!’

Probably the last time I sat on a donkey was on the beach at Blackpool. I seem to remember it having very rough hair that chafed my legs. Our Queen has sat on a few horses in her time. She particularly favoured ‘Betsy’, a black-brown mare in the 1960s. She used a black mare called ‘Burmese’ to troop the colour for eighteen years until 1986. The latter was spooked when a seventeen year old man shot six blanks at the Queen in 1981. With consummate horsemanship she steadied the animal and continued on with the parade.

There is much more to donkey’s than meets the eye! There are five different Hebrew word-roots and composite words which apply to our English word donkey. Further, there are ambiguities (to our mind) regarding whether scripture is referring to a mule, or an hinny, or a colt, or an ass, or a donkey. Simply put, a donkey is a domesticated ass. What would it matter if the animal was male or female? Does its hair colour make any difference to its ability? Isn’t a donkey a poor substitute for a magnificent ceremonial war-horse? How would it look if the Queen turned up on Horse Guards Parade on a donkey to inspect her cavalry? Would tourists want to take a selfie with a Royal Horseguard in resplendent shiny armour sitting so low to the ground atop a donkey that they could easily touch the floor?

Economising on linguistic explanations, it is probable that Jesus was riding on a white colt of an ass when he entered Jerusalem on that original Palm Sunday. Unlike us living in a motorised modern society, the people who lined the road into the city of Jerusalem knew something of great symbolic importance was being enacted by Jesus of Nazareth. They were more literate in Hebrew Scripture, and aware of prophetic teaching than many of us. Jesus' actions echoed, fulfilled, challenged, and clarified what had happened in the history of the Jewish people to that point. Way back in Genesis (49:8-11), Jacob had prophesied of his son's descendants that in the last days: 'Judah, thou art he whom thy brethren shall praise: thy hand shall be on the neck of thine enemies; thy father's children shall bow down before thee. ... The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be. Binding his foal unto the vine, and his ass's colt unto the choice vine; he washed his garments in wine, and his clothes in the blood of grapes.' (Shiloh here is a reference to the Messiah). Notice that Jesus' disciples had loosed the ass for their master, thereby demonstrating Jesus' control over the animal and the owners.

Further, most of the donkeys were domesticated so that they could carry people and burdens. They were usually black or reddish black. Judges 5 (see above) is the Song of Deborah, following a great military victory. She recalled how villagers would not fight against their oppressors, but now the Princes of Israel had led them to victory. These princes rode on docile white she-asses. Linguistically, these asses 'shone' with purity; they were culturally associated with wealth, power, and influence. All king David's sons rode on she-mules, and Solomon was brought to be anointed on a wild ass (1 Kings 33 ff) tamed for David. The royal donkey is a 'pirdat mēleh' or 'père.'

Zechariah tells the people to 'rejoice greatly for your king comes to you riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass... to cut off the chariot of Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem.' The colt is a son of a female donkey. In short, no one else but the Messiah has the authority and power to ride on a young wild donkey colt that has never been sat upon (Luke 19:28 ff). Princes did not ride to war on untrained wild asses or mules! But, here, Jesus was showing that, though he had the power to control an untrained animal, i.e. even power over raw nature, his authority was not going to be exerted through military might, but through peace. He was the heir to the promises made to David. The crowd shouted 'hosanna, son of David'. He was indeed a prince of the royal line of Judah. The prophecies were now fulfilled in Him.

Some depict the triumphal entry into Jerusalem as Jesus riding humbly on an ass to show that he was no military threat. Further, that there was an ignorant, fickle crowd who lauded him at the start of the week, but turned against him at the end of the week. There are many possible and reasonable assumptions about the significance of this event. Indeed, the King's attitude on entering Jerusalem to clear it of war-horses is described in Zechariah as either lowly or afflicted. Yet, he is also triumphant and victorious. On 11th December 1917 General Allenby got off his own war-horse outside the Jaffa Gate and walked in to accept the surrender of Jerusalem from the

Arab leader Sharif Hussaini. In fact, there had been three previously attempted surrenders, first to a couple of cooks who had entered it to find eggs for their officers, the second to a Brigadier, which was revoked by his own General, then all of these were revoked and replaced by the official surrender to General Allenby.

Allenby knew of the prophecies of the Messiah, and of the triumphal entry of Jesus in the New Testament. He also had the humility to respect the significance of this most recent entry to the Holy City.

Symbolism is important. It is a unique expression of human awareness of things that are beyond mere words or signs. But it only exists because of time and space. We are creatures of time and space. Jerusalem is made of stone, bricks and mortar. It was the place where our Saviour rode on a real creature. But, not everybody accepted his authority, nor his offer of salvation.

Today, people can despise Christianity in our Western Culture, as Churches play down the significance of the donkey. Let us avoid relegating the events of Palm Sunday to a fairy tale story for children. Jesus still had more to teach the onlookers, even to the point of shedding His own blood because of their/our ignorance and sin.

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.