

Weekend of the Passion (RCL/B): "Humble & Riding on a Donkey"  
Mark 11:1-11  
March 27-28, 2021  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Remember visiting the zoo when you were a kid? Or taking your own kids or grandkids there? I enjoyed the Turtle Back Zoo on Northfield Ave. in W. Orange when I was little, but the real treat was going to the Bronx Zoo. Sometimes when I visited Aunt Flo in Yonkers we'd have the big adventure of taking a taxi to the Bronx Zoo and spending the whole day. I still remember the little Sicilian donkey we saw, with what looked like a cross etched in charcoal across its shoulders and going down its back. The lovely legend is that it was this kind of donkey that carried our Lord on the first Palm Sunday. In appreciation for his service, the Father traced that cross on its back and promised that all its children and relatives, ever after, would bear that mark of honor.

G.K. Chesterton wrote a poem about the little donkey, describing him this way:

With monstrous head and sickening cry  
And ears like errant wings,  
The devil's walking parody  
Of all four-footed things.

The tatter'd outlaw of the earth  
Of ancient crooked will;  
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.

In St. Mark's telling of the story, there are leafy branches, not palm, on the Lord's parade path, but the donkey still plays an important role, carrying the One who comes in the name of the Lord.... A donkey may not **seem** a classy means of transport, but in ancient Israel the

anointed king sometimes traveled on a donkey. There was also a tradition that the king went off to war on a steed, then returned victorious on a donkey, signaling peace.

We associate the donkey with humility. Victor Hugo drew on that when he wrote *Les Miserables*. Those of you who have seen that play or movie or read the book will remember the kind bishop who offers Jean Valjean, a recently released convict, a roof over his head for the night. Valjean repays the bishop's kindness by stealing his silverware. When the police catch Valjean (#24601) and haul him back to the bishop, he expects to be consigned to the galleys for the rest of his life. Instead the Bishop explains to the police (little white lie) that he **gave** Valjean the silver! Then he asks Valjean why he didn't take the silver candlesticks, too, and sends him away with them! The part of the story that didn't make it to Broadway is that the bishop was a devoted shepherd to his flock and visited his people far and wide. He knew he could cover more ground riding than walking, so here's what happened:

One day, riding on a donkey, he arrived at [an important town]. His purse being empty at the time, he could not afford any better conveyance. The mayor of the city, coming to receive him at the gate of the bishop's residence, was mortified to see him dismount from his donkey. Several citizens stood nearby, laughing. "Monsieur Mayor," the bishop said, "and good citizens, I can see why you are shocked; you think it shows pride for a poor priest to use the same conveyance used by Jesus Christ. I have done it for necessity, I assure you, and not from vanity."<sup>1</sup>

The bishop has the same startling level of humility as John the Baptist, who said he was not even worthy to stoop and untie the thong of the Lord Jesus' sandals.... (John 1:27)

Ultimately, though, it's not the humility of John the Baptist or the Bishop or the little donkey that is most important: it is the humility of our Lord Himself. In Paul's letter to the Philippians, part of which we heard earlier, Paul puts it best. Here's a paraphrase:

*5-8 Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion. (Philippians 2:5-8, *The Message*)*

This is the beginning of Holy Week 2021, a fresh chance for us to remember and marvel at our Lord's outpouring of Himself for us. Come in person or join our livestream worship at 7:30 on Thursday evening as we receive absolution for our sins, revisit the Last Supper 2,000 years ago and celebrate the Lord's Supper now. Come in person or join our livestream at 7:30 on Friday evening as we hear again the beautiful Passion story according to St. John and as we file forward to stand before the cross, expressing our love and asking again the blessing of our crucified and risen Lord. Join our livestream on Holy Saturday night as we celebrate the Great Vigil and First Eucharist of Easter, beginning with the lighting of the Easter fire, the procession of the newly kindled Paschal candle into the darkened sanctuary, the readings describing our salvation history, the transition from darkness into light as we hear the Holy Noise resolve into the Gloria and then the first alleluia's, the first trumpet blasts of Easter ring out! Easter morning we'll livestream worship from indoors at 8:45, then gather outside for the Easter liturgy at 10:30, Lord-willing and weather-permitting.

As we go forth into Holy Week, let's carry in our hearts St. Paul's pastoral advice to the Philippians, his wise guidance about how we are to be followers of our Lord Jesus in action and not just in name.

*2 1-4 If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care—then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each*

*other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.*

Be humble, as He is humble. Be grateful. Be loving. Be faith-filled. Carry Christ into the world as the little donkey once did. And remember, we, too, in Holy Baptism have been marked with the cross of Christ forever. Amen

<sup>1</sup>Victor Hugo, *Les Miserables* (NY: New American Library, 1987), p. 9.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham