

Views from the Pews: Palm Sunday

Donkeys have a long and significant history in biblical literature. They were the universal beast of burden of the time (Genesis 22:3, 42:26), remarkably strong for their size, endlessly patient, able to survive on minimal forage when necessary, and a symbol of humility (as opposed to the horses ridden by men of status). As indispensable working animals they were so valuable that the Sabbath commandment specified that 'you shall cease from labour so that your ox and your donkey may rest' (Ex 23:12).

Even so, donkeys were often illtreated, as in the story of Balaam's donkey in Numbers 22:27. She stopped in her tracks, and tried to turn aside when she saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with his sword drawn. Balaam could not see the angel, so his first reaction was to beat the donkey. When Balaam was at last able to see the angel, he was told that, rather than being disobedient, the donkey had actually saved Balaam's life. 'Why have you struck your donkey these three times?' asked the angel. 'I have come out as an adversary, because your way is perverse before me. The donkey saw me, and turned away from me these three times. If it had not turned away from me, surely I would by now have killed you and let it live.' (vv.32-33). So much for Balaam's superiority over the humblest of his servants.

Zechariah 9:9 had declared that the messianic king so long expected would be 'humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey'. Matthew was always concerned to show how Jesus fulfilled First Testament prophecy, so he was quite specific that Jesus told his disciples to bring him both the donkey and the colt that was with her. 'They brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them'. He could not ride both donkey and colt at once, so the 'them' must refer to the cloaks.

The crowds assembled in Jerusalem, who had heard Jesus's teaching and witnessed his miracles, were already developing a strong sense of anticipation that he was far more than an ordinary rabbi. Even those unfamiliar with Zechariah's actual words would have seen Jesus' very public action as a deliberate and provocative statement, with messianic significance. With Romans watching, the excited reaction was not wise, but inevitable.

Kim King