

# 2020 Palm Sunday: The Gospel According to Donkeys

*by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle*

## Prayer of Illumination



Let your Word, O God, break open our hearts this day  
through the power of the Holy Spirit,  
that we may enter into this Holy Week  
with the same mind that was in Christ Jesus. Amen.

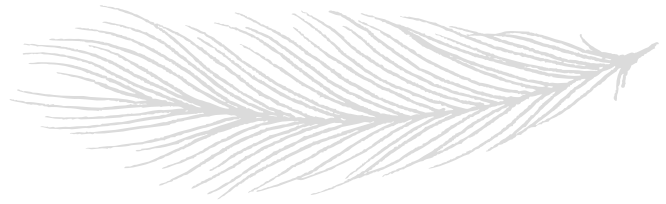
## Background



Jesus' popularity ratings are going through the roof. It all started with a small band of disciples who dropped their nets and followed him. Then more people began listening to his teachings. Now a huge crowd is following him into the Holy City. The Man from Galilee is now making his Jerusalem debut.

He's going public with his new identity—not as Teacher, but as Messiah and King. And Jesus demonstrates a fascinating combination of humility and confidence in this scene. During Passover, pilgrims always entered Jerusalem on foot. But Jesus entered on a donkey. He's not trying to blend in or go under the radar here. Jesus' choice of a donkey, rather than a war steed, was a strong message that his reign would be known by peace and humility, not coercion. He wasn't a Kingly Warrior, but rather the Prince of Peace.

Let's hear now the Word of the Lord from:



**Scripture: Matthew 21:1-11 (NRSV)**

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

"Tell the daughter of Zion,  
Look, your king is coming to you,  
humble, and mounted on a donkey,  
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them.

A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

"Hosanna to the Son of David!  
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!  
Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

*The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.*

**SERMON – The Gospel According to Donkeys**



Today is Palm Sunday. Palms represent victory and triumph—the crowds waving palms recognized Jesus as a national hero. But there could be another name given to Palm Sunday. You could also call it Donkey Sunday. The problem is donkeys have a bad rap in the animal kingdom. They just can't shake the reputation of being sub-par, substandard, subservient, stubborn, and just plain stupid. But nothing could be further from the truth.



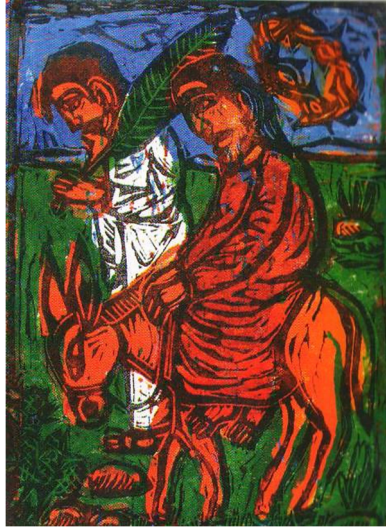
There's an Australian proverb that says when you watch donkeys in a meadow, don't forget to bring a chair. Donkeys are remarkable creatures—second only to camels in their ability to live and work in arid, desert environments. Donkeys can lose up to ¼ of their body weight through dehydration and yet continue to carry on and carry their burdens. They can rehydrate and regain their weight within a few hours. They're pretty low maintenance animals, requiring little feeding. They're also known to be very loyal—who knows maybe it's the donkey, not the dog, that's man's best friend! ☺

Donkeys are not only physically resilient—they're intelligent too. The latest research on donkeys notes that they have a higher learning ability than horses, mules, and ox. Yet we still call people we don't care too much for "donkeys" (or a less diplomatic synonym). We call stubborn people "mules."

This morning we need to be re-educated about donkeys. We need to sit at the hooves of the donkey and learn from their wisdom. Let's have ears to hear the gospel according to donkeys this holy week.

I think donkeys might have a branding problem because they aren't flashy like horses. Horses are fast and have a regal air to them. But to get at the power and beauty of donkeys, you have to go deeper than the surface.

...



Jesus knows this about donkeys. It's no accident he's on a donkey for his triumphal entry. It's also important to notice that he isn't riding on a mule. It's a donkey. The two are different. In Jesus' day, "mules" were considered strong, symbols of greatness. So, Jesus was not riding on a mule—some hyped up kingly hybrid. Instead, as Matthew makes clear, Jesus was riding on a lowly, hard-working, beast of burden—a full-bred donkey.

What he's doing here is connecting with his humble roots. A donkey likely took Jesus' mother Mary to Bethlehem, where he was born. A donkey stood beside Jesus in the manger. A donkey whisked him and his family away to Egypt to escape Herod's rage. It's the donkey that ties the birth and the death of Jesus together.



*Is there any better animal symbol of our faith than the donkey?*



Donkeys are mentioned 153 times in the Bible, more than any other animal. The two animals most associated with Jesus are also rather unimpressive creatures: a dove and a donkey. The dove is really just a white pigeon, a trash bird. The donkey is the exact opposite of a stallion, synonymous with humility and service. Donkeys push themselves—they can never be pulled. Donkeys are traditionally deemed “stubborn” and demeaned as “stupid” because they’re actually... *smart*.

Donkeys know when the load they’re carrying is too much and will tumble off—and so they refuse to move—they know their limits. Horses don’t. Donkeys know what’s the best path. If you want to go right, but your donkey insists upon going left, you had better go left. Trust your donkey. Horses can’t be trusted. If you want to cross a river at a certain place, and your donkey resists and wants to move downstream, trust your donkey. Horses will drown you. Donkeys won’t.

The only animal that speaks in the Bible, except for the serpent in the Garden, is Balaam’s ass, an animal who valiantly tried to steer his master around an angry angel of the Lord, and as a result got beat three different times for his efforts. The donkey saw and knew the will of God, but Balaam just didn’t get it—until God put the power of speech into the donkey’s mouth.

*“Some trust in chariots and some in horses,”* the psalmist said. Jesus was different—he trusted in donkeys, and the one who created them. You can trust your donkey. The donkey could sure-hoofedly pick a path on the stony slope to the holy city. The donkey knew where he was going and stuck to the road, regardless of the crowds, noise, distractions, and dangers. You can’t tell the Jesus story without the donkey story of service, steadiness, single-minded devotion, and smartness.



The earliest image we have of Jesus on the cross is not a positive one. It’s a mocking one, with Jesus on the cross wearing the head of a donkey. The picture you see dates from around 200 AD, and is carved into plaster. It was discovered in 1857 during some archeological digs and was dubbed *Alexamenos graffito*. To the left is a man raising his hand in worship or prayer. To his right is Jesus suspended from a cross. He has the body of a man, but the head of a donkey. The inscription reads, *“Alexamenos sebetai theon,”* or “Alexamenos worships his God.”

To follow Jesus is not to ride into town on stallions of success and glory and machismo. But rather to be as the book of Hebrews says,

*"... looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God."* Hebrews 12:2 (KJV)

Like Jesus, like the donkey, we will be the butt of jokes, the brunt of mockery, as we raise our hands to a Savior that is hailed one day and nailed the next.



Immanuel, don't forget our "donkey heritage"—a heritage of service, humility, steadiness, smartness, and single-minded devotion. We're a people who persevere through pandemonium and pandemics.

Donkey Sunday is a reminder for us as a church to get into beast mode—being beasts of service that Jesus can trust to carry him into the world. Let's even make donkeys of ourselves—by faithfully and humbly serving Christ every step of the way.

Immanuel, let's listen to the gospel according to donkeys—Jesus did. And so must we.

**Amen.**

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