

Animals of the Bible (11) The Donkey



“He must have been a very good horseman!” That was the comment of an American cowboy on the story of the triumphal entry of the Lord Jesus into Jerusalem. He had a point. The Gospels tell us that the donkey Jesus rode was a young colt, which had never been ridden before. People were shouting, waving branches and laying down cloaks on the road ahead. It sounds rather like the training given to police horses today! And yet the donkey calmly carried Jesus through the streets and up to the Temple.

Animals can sense when someone is gentle and means them no harm. Many of the stories of the saints speak of their affinity with animals which trusted them and came close to them. I think the donkey somehow recognised that it was safe in the hands of Jesus, and so made no attempt to bolt or to throw Him off.

Matthew and John both connect this event with the words of the prophet Zechariah (chapter 9, verse 9). In the Good News Bible this reads, “Rejoice, 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 – on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” The way the animal is described as “the foal of a donkey” makes it clear that this is a pure-bred donkey and not a mule, the offspring of a jackass and a mare.

Zechariah’s prophecy, written more than five hundred years before the coming of Christ, itself echoed an older passage, Genesis 49, verse 11. Jacob blessed his sons before he died, and said of Judah, “Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey’s colt to the choice vine, he washes his garments in wine, and his robe in the blood of grapes” (New Revised Standard Version). Jacob was speaking prophetically of the wealth of Judah’s descendants, included

among whom were David and Solomon and the kings who followed in their line. A donkey tethered to a grapevine would proceed to eat its juicy shoots, and only a wealthy man could afford to lose some of his crop in this way.

Jesus, hailed as the son of David, had all the wealth of heaven at His disposal, but as Charles Wesley puts it, "emptied Himself of all but love." By riding into Jerusalem, surrounded by His followers, He was declaring that He was entering the city as a victorious king. This King, however, was coming in peace, seated on a donkey rather than a warhorse. What that meant for Him, and for us all, was revealed a few days later, when His victory was won, not on a battlefield, but on a cross.

A prayer:

Lord Jesus, who entered Jerusalem as a conquering King, yet coming in peace, enter into our hearts and establish in us your kingly reign of love, for your name's sake. AMEN

- Rev John Barnett

Image: Entry of the Christ in Jerusalem, Jerome JeanLeon (1824-1904)