

A funny thing happened on the way to today’s Forum. I had assigned myself the topic of “Why a donkey? Now, you may already know an answer to this question; I hope you will bring your answer to Forum today **at 11:30 or so** to see if our answers match. But a funny thing, an unexpected thing, happened: In thinking about the donkey, I came to understand better what Jesus might have been “up to” when he entered Jerusalem for Passover (and what we might be “up to” when we focus on the palms).

I am sure that you all know that there is a prophecy made by Zechariah (9:9) that our “king” (that is, the Messiah) would come riding a donkey.

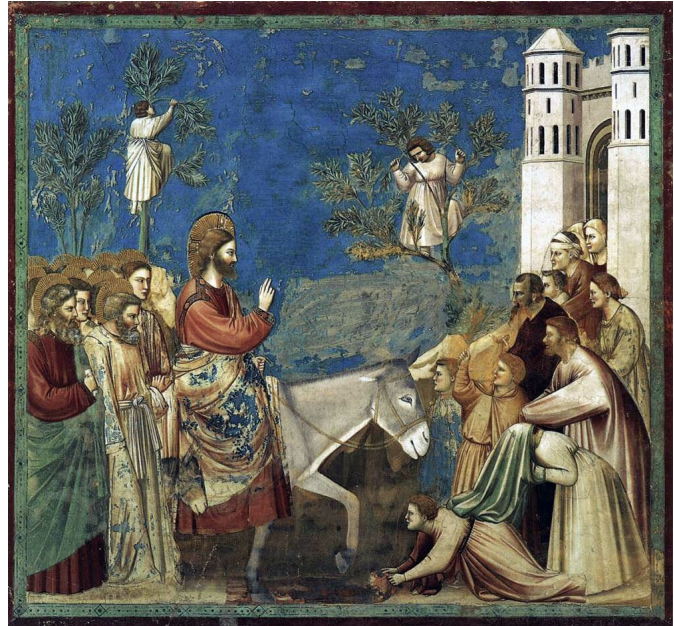
I’d bet you also long ago figured out that the donkey ride didn’t just happen. I mean, Jesus told two of his disciples exactly where to go to get the donkey and what to say to whoever asked.

We don’t know who owned the donkey. They weren’t rich, though. Did you know that there was more than one owner? Shared ownership of a donkey isn’t great wealth.

- Were the owners people who Jesus had healed or fed or taught?
- ??Friends of Lazarus, who Jesus had raised from death?
- ??Devout people who recognized Truth personified in Christ Jesus?
- ??Or just people from whom Jesus had arranged to get the donkey?

Does it even matter who owned the donkey, and why?

The new thing I pondered this week was that Jesus’ disciples **were the crowd** that instigated the reception that Jesus got while entering Jerusalem. Oh, others joined, but Jesus’ disciples were the ones who put their cloaks on the donkey. THEN others who came to put **their** cloaks on the path ahead of the donkey, a **la red carpet**. (Did you know that the first written mention of a red carpet was in a Greek play entitled Agamemnon [a·guh·mem·naan] in 458 BC? In that play, Agamemnon’s wife speaks of a “floor of crimson broideries to spread / for the King’s path.” In the play, Agamemnon’s wife rolled out the crimson carpet to convince her husband to walk to his death.)



Giotto (Italian 1267-1337). *The Entry into Jerusalem*, circa 1305. Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, Italy, public domain

Back to Luke: After the disciples laid down Jesus’s red carpet, the “whole multitude **of disciples** began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power they had seen.” They shouted, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”, evoking Psalm 118:26, in today’s Psalm.

Our Liturgy of the Palms gospel lesson today makes clear that Jesus’ disciples were the ones loudly praising of Jesus. You heard that lesson read: By the time the shouting had begun, there were Pharisees in the crowd who told Jesus to “order your disciples to stop.” We don’t know whether the Pharisees thought the disciples were committing heresy or treason—or both!

Somehow, this wasn’t the image I’ve held of Jesus’ disciples before his Crucifixion; I had thought the disciples a bit dim. Jesus had told them at least three times along their trip to Jerusalem that he was going there to “die and rise again” and scripture says the disciples were afraid and didn’t understand him.

But apparently, I was the one who’s been a bit dim, but about Jesus’ **disciples**, not about Jesus. John’s gospel says that Jesus’ raising Lazarus from death convinced them and many others who Jesus was. But all the gospels agree that the disciples misunderstood what Christ Jesus had come to do.

We can’t fairly blame the disciples for misunderstanding Jesus’ vision and mission, though. The prophet Zechariah said that a “king” would come riding a donkey, and the disciples must have taken that word literally.

We, with our 20-40 hindsight, understand that Christ Jesus hadn’t come to free Israel from the Romans, at least not directly. But here Jesus and his growing ranks of disciples were entering Jerusalem for Passover, the Jewish celebration of God having freed their ancestors from the Egyptians. “Surely,” the disciples must have thought, “this is when and where God was going to physically free them, also.”

I’ve explained all this about the events of the day we call “Palm Sunday” not as a history lesson about what Jesus was “up to” by riding a donkey into Jerusalem, but rather to focus our attention on what Jesus was here to teach us. And what Jesus was “up to” in the larger sense was to teach us non-violent resistance to the powers and principalities of our world—like turning the other cheek and walking the extra mile—to bring about social and political change, **namely** realigning our world to be more and more like the Kingdom of God as we live what Jesus taught.

- Said another way, Jesus came to show us how to “live no longer for ourselves, but for the one who for our sake died and was raised” (2 Cor. 5:15).

- Said yet another way, Jesus came to teach us to strive for a world where everyone is valued and there is a fair allocation of resources, opportunities, and benefits to all people. You may recognize these words as the definition of “distributive justice.” We might recognize the donkey owners’ act as an example of distributive justice.

What we Christ-followers **all** minimize are the economic aspects of Jesus’ teaching, especially those that require us to disrupt our current notions of individual wealth and economic gain. You might have another view of what Jesus’ vision for our world is. We can disagree but find common ground in helping others in the name of Christ Jesus. Consider the times you might have seen and perhaps even participated in living this Christ-vision: giving of your talent and treasure to help people in need; lending money with no expectation of return; and welcoming and treating all people as equal in the eyes of God.

Alternatively, we **might** [head shake NO] just come to church each week and on this Palm Sunday wave palm branches, and shout, “Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!”

Two last things:

- First, did you notice that there were **no branches** waved in Luke’s account today? Palms were zealots’ symbols in Jesus’ day, symbols of violent political revolution. Instead, we just have that “red carpet” and praise for Christ Jesus, who comes anew to us **this very day**, not riding on a donkey, but sharing his vision of love and life.
- Finally, I asked earlier if it mattered who gave Jesus the donkey, and why. “Of course, it mattered greatly.” If Jesus had simply walked into Jerusalem, scripture would have remained unfulfilled, and Jesus would have been just another teacher. And why the donkey’s owners handed over the animal is also crucially important. Their actions are a shining example for us of obedience to Christ Jesus over cost.