

Lessons From A Donkey

Behold, your King is coming to you, lowly, and sitting on a donkey. -Mt 21:5

Today is Palm Sunday, when we celebrate Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem; where he was greeted with joyful shouts of Hosanna, and palms and clothes were laid before him like a red carpet. This joyful greeting would not last long, as we know from the final events of Holy Week. But on this day, Palm Sunday, Jesus and his Apostles received a royal reception. It must have felt good to them, that all their work on all those sleepless nights-travelling, teaching and healing so many in need-had finally paid off. After all, who doesn't need to be appreciated for their work?

In fact, I would guess that most of us fantasize regularly about receiving such a royal reception at work, at home or at church. We are all so hungry for praise and gratitude, and are so often discouraged when it is not forthcoming. We say to ourselves; 'If only people knew my contribution at work, they would tell me I was indispensable and pay me accordingly.' 'If my family understood how hard I work, they would greet me after a long day with appreciation and care.' 'If only this church saw all I have done for it' we have all probably thought at times, 'people would treat me with due deference and respect, like they did Jesus.' Well Jesus, it turns out didn't get hung up on praise. He saw right through the adulation and praise of Palm Sunday, and willingly submitted himself to bear the cross. We will follow Jesus through this coming 'Holy Week' and learn a profound lesson from his example. Time and again, he reminds us that our hunger for recognition and praise is so often the devil whispering in our ears, a distraction from the voice of our Father.

And when the devil does whisper in our ear, and our egos get caught up in self-fancy and ambitions, we can come back down to earth by asking ourselves a question that a certain pastor asked his church in his Palm Sunday sermon: 'What if the donkey on which Jesus was riding had thought all the cheering was for him? What if that small animal had believed that the hosannas and the branches were in his honor?' Behind the humor, this is a challenging question every Christian should regularly ask themselves at work, at home and at church. 'Maybe I am not deserving of special applause at work, after all I am a part of a greater team, they deserve the applause. Maybe I am not deserving of special applause at home, after all my spouse works just as hard as me. Maybe I am not deserving of special praise in church, many have worked as hard as me, and nothing I've done amounts to anything without God's blessing.'

This minister then pointed to himself and said: 'I'm a donkey. The longer I'm here the more you'll come to realize that. I am only a Christ-bearer and not the object of praise.' I don't know about you, but I am very comfortable with the phrase 'you're a donkey' but not at all used to 'I'm a donkey.' Yet this is our Christian calling, to see other people and ourselves as always carrying something much greater than us. This is at once very humbling and very liberating.

Because after working so hard and carrying such heavy burdens at work, at home and even at church-it is truly hard to humble ourselves to remember that it is not about you and me. That the recognition, the applause, the praise is not for us, it is for the treasure we are carrying, be that the good of the team, the health of the family, the sanctity of God's church. This is very humbling but is also very liberating and uplifting. First because if we learn that the praise is not all for us, then neither is the criticism. But more importantly, if we truly believe that we are a part of something greater, we will live with less worry and more joy, learning to work hard and then surrender the results to God. This is a key attitude to a life well lived, since so much of what is important in life is impossible for us alone, but possible with God. Or to be very precise, is possible under God.

So on this Palm Sunday, let us remember who we are in relation to God. We are like donkeys bearing the Son of God, bringing him into the places- at work, at home and at church-where Jesus can transform us and all who see Him, into humble servants, showing great love. My prayer on this Palm Sunday, through Holy Week and throughout this year, is that we remember how small we are compared to the great treasure we carry. That, instead of demanding that people see what we are doing, we help them see Christ Jesus, the King. That, rather than seeking credit for our good works, we give credit instead to others, and give all Glory to God. For this is the great treasure we were made to bear, now and always and unto the ages of ages; amen.