

Message for Palm Sunday – March 28, 2021

Mark 11:1-11

In a short sermon that was printed in a 2006 issue of the magazine “The Christian Century”, Thomas Long, who was the highly respected professor of preaching at Emory University in the States, posed this question: “Who were the two disciples that were sent to get the donkey on that very first Palm Sunday?”

I must admit that I had never given this any real thought before and my initial reaction was who knows and who cares? As Long quite rightly points out though, in his gospel Mark uses only eleven verses to describe what happened on that first Palm Sunday and of the eleven, five, or almost half, are concerned with getting the donkey. In fact Mark tells us more about the getting of the donkey than he does about the actual triumphant entry itself. This really doesn't seem to make sense but for his part Long is convinced that Mark did this to make a point; Long believes that the reason why Mark did this lies in what happened a little while earlier.

Jesus and his disciples were making their way to Jerusalem and slowly but surely the tension was building. Everyone knew that when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem there would be a confrontation with the authorities, but what would happen next? The disciples, like most people, expected that since Jesus was the Messiah he would drive out the Romans and establish the Kingdom of God here on earth in all of its glory. To be sure Jesus had often spoke about going to Jerusalem to die and then to be raised on the third day but, by and large, the disciples either didn't understand what Jesus was telling them or else failed to take him seriously.

As they got closer to Jerusalem two of the disciples, James and John, started to fret. What would their position be once Jesus had established the kingdom? They decided to ask him but, like a little child, they decided to come at it sideways. “We want you to give us whatever we ask for” they asked. Well, as any parent knows, when a child asks this you can be certain that the answer will probably be ‘no!’. Jesus though asked them to be more specific. “When you come into your glory” they asked, “let us sit on your right and on your left”. In other words, we know that you are number one but we want to be number two

and number three! We want to be more important than the other disciples! It certainly didn't take long for the other disciples to find out what James and John were up to, and to say that they were angry would be an understatement; indeed they were absolutely furious! I wonder what Jesus must have thought, seeing his disciples bickering like a bunch of jealous children over who was most important. As he so often did though, Jesus took advantage of the situation to teach them.

Jesus noted that in the world of the Gentiles the rulers lorded over everyone else. That however wasn't the way it was to be amongst his followers. In the Kingdom of God, those who served others and put others first would themselves be first. They could consider himself for example. He was the Christ, the Messiah, the very Son of God and yet he didn't go around expecting everyone to serve him. Instead he served others; he taught, he healed and he had even come, as the old gospel hymn puts it, "to yield his life an atonement for sin, to open the lifegate that all may go in". Putting others first is what Jesus and his ministry was all about, and so it should be with his followers as well. Instead of being so worried about who was number one, number two, number three and so on, they should just get on with helping others. And this brings us back to what happened on that first Palm Sunday.

In his short sermon Long wonders about who was sent to get the donkey and he believes that it was James and John, the two disciples who had earlier been so worried about who was most important. Long of course can't prove it but he is absolutely convinced that Jesus specifically sent those two disciples to make a point. Was it an honour to go get the donkey while all the rest of the disciples were getting ready for the grand entry? Not really. To quote Long himself:

"Though no one knows what these two disciples were thinking, I'm very confident that they had imagined for themselves a grander and more noble role on this day than being on donkey detail.

Some glory they were now experiencing! Jesus is to go head-to-head with the principalities and rulers; striding into the city, his disciples at last having a chance to be vindicated before the whole world. And here are Jesus' two disciples, sent out looking for a stable from which to rent a donkey. This is not an inspiring story of how great it is to be a disciple of Jesus!"

No, it is not an inspiring story about how great it is to be one of Jesus' disciples but it is certainly a realistic one. This is to say, were the two disciples thrilled to be on the donkey detail? Quite likely not. Were there other things that they would have preferred to be doing that morning? Quite likely so and yet, as ordinary, trivial, or mundane a job as it was, it still had to be done. If there wasn't a donkey then Jesus couldn't have entered Jerusalem in triumph fulfilling Zechariah's ancient prophesy:

Lo your king comes to you,
Triumphant and victorious is he.
Humble and riding on an ass,
On a colt the foal of an ass.

Without a donkey there could not have been a grand entry and without the entry there wouldn't have been the confrontation with the authorities. And without the confrontation there would not have been a cross. And without the cross there would not have been a resurrection. It all came down to the two disciples who were on the donkey detail and surely there is a lesson in this for all of us.

When we speak about the Kingdom of God, we usually think of heaven and the life yet to come. This is understandable but what we must also remember is that the Kingdom isn't just something we look forward to in the future; it is also here and now as well. The Kingdom of God is also here on earth and is made a reality wherever and whenever people act like Christ and put others first. This is the Kingdom of God here on earth, and its rise or fall depends upon us and what we choose to do each and every day. Do we have many if any great opportunities to do something spectacularly wonderful for the Kingdom? Probably not but we certainly have lots of little opportunities to do so, and it is through the ordinary and mundane, being on the donkey detail as if it were, that the love and the presence of God is made real in the world around us. We may sometimes be tempted to think that we can't make much of a difference and that our lives don't really matter, but nothing could be further from the truth. That in fact may be one of the lessons of the present pandemic.

The past year has been a very difficult and challenging one for most people but one thing that the pandemic has done is bring out the best in many people. To be sure, in a few instances the pandemic has brought out the worst in some people, hoarding and queue jumping the vaccination lineup come to mind, but in many more instances it has brought out the best. I think for example of the mother with a child in Sick Kids Hospital. To put in the time while there she knit a number of items and decided to auction them off with the proceeds going to the hospital; it was her way of saying thank you. When the online auction was held the items brought in far more money than what they were really worth. Or to use another example, there is a segment every weeknight on a local TV newscast entitled "Toronto Together". It tells uplifting stories of what people are doing, great and small, for others. I am sure too that if we each gave it some thought, we could think of many other examples. None of these acts of caring and sharing may dramatically change the world, but they do make a difference, especially in these difficult and challenging times.

There is not and cannot be a kingdom of God here on earth without each of us doing our own everyday tasks acts of caring, and we remember that today. To return to the event that we remember on this Palm Sunday, were James and John happy to be on the donkey detail while all the rest of the disciples were getting ready for the big celebration? Probably not and yet without them, Palm Sunday and all that followed would have never happened. And so it is with us; the things we say and do this day and every day matter, they really do, even when it seems as if we too are just on the donkey detail.