

Donkey Detail & Costly Ointment

Mark 11:1-11 & 14:3-9

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Palm Sunday

On a spring day in the year 30, two processions entered the city of Jerusalem.



From the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, Samaria and Idumea entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. They had come to Jerusalem because it was the beginning of the Passover festival. They came not out of respect or to honor the traditions of the Jewish people, but to enforce the *Pax Romana* - the Roman peace. Passover was and is the foundational celebration of Israel's

liberation from slavery in Egypt. Pilate and his army came to make sure that the hundreds of thousands of pilgrims flooding the city didn't get any ideas about being liberated from the dominion of Rome. The city leaders — the high priests, the members of the Sanhedrin and their entourages — dutifully gathered to watch the cavalry riding in on their war horses, the soldiers marching in time to the beat of the drums, the sun glinting off the metal of their helmets, weapons, and military standards. A silent audience, some curious, some awed, some resentful.¹

On the opposite side of the city, from the east, another procession. This one made up of peasants, people who worked the land and sea. They had come on foot from their homes in Galilee, walking a hundred miles, to celebrate Passover in the Holy City. Jesus had walked with them, teaching and healing along the way. As they drew near the city, they organized a procession. Two disciples were sent off to second a donkey in a village as they passed through. Others cut leafy branches from the fields on either side of the road. At the top of the Mount of Olives the city with its gleaming marble and gold temple came into view. Perhaps they also caught glimpses of sunlight dancing off the Roman standards on the other side of the city. The Galilean pilgrims began to wave their palm branches as others laid their cloaks not the road to make a "red" carpet



¹ Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Cross, *The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus' Final Week in Jerusalem*, Harper San Francisco, 2006, pp. 2-3.

for Jesus. Some ran ahead, and others followed, as Jesus entered the city. They were shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

On a spring day in the year 30, two processions entered the city of Jerusalem. The two processions embody two very different ways of living in the world — the Roman way of power might and in contrast to Jesus’ way of peace and service. We might wait with baited breath for the inevitable clash as the army committed to violence and war meets up with pilgrims longing for God’s kingdom of wholeness and holiness. But Pilate and his soldiers turn aside to and enter the Antonia Fortress, from where they will be deployed to keep watch over the crowds from the rooftops and walls surrounding the temple. Jesus and his followers make their way to the Temple, where he looks around at everything, then quietly slips out of the city and returns to Bethany for the night.

Mark’s first audiences knew very well, from their own first hand experience that to follow the way of Jesus was to be in conflict with Roman imperial power and Roman imperial theology, that is could lead to arrest, imprisonment and death in really nasty ways. Yet that is not what Mark emphasizes in his telling of Jesus’ final week. Did you notice that over half of the processional gospel is occupied with mundane details about finding and fetching a donkey — where to go to find it, what kind of donkey to look for, what to do, what to say.² The first three verses are instructions to the donkey detail, while the next four are a description of how the donkey detail carried out its task. Mark doesn’t tell us the names of the two disciples who were sent out as donkey-fetchers. This kind of omission on the part of the gospel writer is often intentional, inviting us to put ourselves into these roles.



From our processional gospel we learn that being a disciple of Jesus might mean being delegated to the donkey detail. Following Jesus in the way of peace and service might involve fetching donkeys, taking care of details that are necessary but which are not the main event. In fact almost all of our church work falls into this category: humble, routine, yet highly essential tasks: organizing worship helpers, baking bread, filling communion trays, washing communion cups, sewing banners, providing coffee hour treats, counting the offering, handing out bulletins, changing light bulbs, shoveling the sidewalks, practicing new music, planning Sunday school lessons, preparing meals for homeless people, the list could go on and on. All these and so many more mundane, sometimes challenging, occasionally frustrating tasks are all part of preparing the way for Jesus in our lives and in the lives of our neighbors. How

that happens is often a mystery hidden from our eyes. In the name of Jesus, I want to thank all of

² Thomas G. Long, “Donkey Fetchers (Mark 11:1-11),” originally published in *The Christian Century*, April 4, 2006, p. 18, available at www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3389.

you who do the work of the donkey detail in this community of faith. Your work is holy and precious, and absolutely necessary to the mission of Christ in this place.

Alongside the donkey detail, this morning I want to lift up another anonymous disciple of Jesus about whom Jesus said, “wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her” (Mark 14:9). This unnamed woman was probably one of the “many other women” who had followed Jesus in Galilee, provided for him, and come up to Jerusalem with him (15:41). We meet her again at the foot of the cross on Good Friday. In this text, she follows Jesus to the home of Simon the leper, a man whose skin disease rendered him unclean, unholy and unfit to participate in the religious community. Jesus should not be there, but he is because his mission is to heal the broken. She should not be there, but she is because she has heard Jesus prophesy his death and resurrection. She believes that since he is going to die and rise, she must anoint him now beforehand because she will never have a chance to do it afterward. She gives the living Jesus the loving care his corpse will never receive. Jesus is grateful. He does not quibble about the appropriateness of the time or the place or the cost of the ointment which was worth a year’s wages for a peasant laborer. In fact Jesus defends her when she is accused of wasting ointment that might have been sold and the money given to the poor.³



Just as we are invited to see ourselves in the disciples delegated to the donkey detail, we are invited to see ourselves in this woman with the valuable resource. Jesus tells us that the poor are with us always so we can show kindness to them at any time (14:7), but we are also faced with situations that call for more personal acts of love. Filling up a Feed the World coin box is one way to help the poor. To open our church home to house and feed a homeless family for a week is a more personal act of love. Our regular tithing, our special appeals support the mission of Christ locally and globally. To commit ourselves to walk alongside someone in crisis, to prepare a funeral luncheon for a grieving family, to go out of our way to offer a ride or do some chores for a shut-in, to teach our children, to guide our youth preparing for the summer Gathering — all these, and many of the tasks that might feel like items for the donkey detail are personal acts of love. In the name of Jesus, I want to thank you who give so generously of your valuable resources in this community of faith. The money, time and energy you give is holy and precious, and absolutely necessary to support the mission of Christ in this place. Wherever the good news of the gospel is proclaimed, what you have done and are doing will be told as part of the story of Jesus. Amen.

³ See Borg and Crossan, pp. 103-105. Mary Ann Tolbert, “Mark” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, edited by Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, Westminster John Knox Press, 1998, pp. 350-362, here pp. 357-358.

