Palm Sunday April 5, 2020

Jesus enters the holy city as his followers shout: “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!” The claim that Jesus is king caused his arrest and his death on a cross as a traitor.

But his entrance into Jerusalem isn’t very kinglike. Pontius Pilate – just a local governor, not remotely a king – came into Jerusalem around the same time as Jesus atop a huge warhorse, accompanied by soldiers and chariots.

Instead of riding on a warhorse, Jesus comes into the holy city peaceable and humble, riding on a donkey, an animal with cross shaped stripes on their backs.

Donkeys turn up in many Bible stories. Samson used the jawbone of one to slay a thousand Philistines, and God gave voice to one in the story of Balaam’s Ass in the book of Numbers. The ten commandments tell us we should not covet our neighbor’s donkey. And our Christmas tradition has Jesus’ mother Mary riding a donkey on her way to Bethlehem. Through it all, the donkeys retain their humility.

The humble donkey has also been the subject of poetry: Mary Oliver has written a poem about Jesus’ donkey – it’s called “The Poet Thinks of the Donkey”:

On the outskirts of Jerusalem

the donkey waited.

Not especially brave, or filled with understanding,

he stood and waited.

How horses, turned out into the meadow,

leap with delight!

How doves, released from their cages,

clatter away, splashed with sunlight.

But the donkey, tied to a tree as usual, waited.

Then he let himself be led away.

Then he let the stranger mount.

Never had he seen such crowds!

And I wonder if he at all imagined what was to happen.

Still, he was what he had always been: small, dark, obedient.

I hope, finally, he felt brave.

I hope, finally, he loved the man who rode so lightly upon him,

as he lifted one dusty hoof and stepped, as he had to, forward……

As we begin Holy Week, it can be hard to enter into what happened, to let ourselves be immersed in a story with so much pain, as we may currently have difficulty comprehending the suffering so near and in our midst. We too, like the donkey, may not feel especially brave, or filled with understanding. But the man who rides so lightly on the donkey may help us be brave. We can step forward, walking next to the donkey and following our king, Jesus. Our king brings humility and peace to our world even as he willingly goes forward to his violent death, leading us with him through the suffering and into new life.

You and I are now being led through suffering and pain, and we do not yet know how it will end. But we are not alone. We have each other. And we worship a God who understands our suffering. One riding on a donkey, not a war horse, a Savior modeling for us humility, a servant leader.

In a recent daily meditation, The Franciscan Friar Richard Rohr wrote: “Life is not about us, but we are about life. We are not our own. We are an instance of a universal and even eternal pattern. Life is living itself in us. Understanding that our lives are not about us is the connection point with everything else. It lowers the mountains and fills in the valleys that we have created, as we gradually recognize that the myriad forms of life in the universe are merely parts of the one life that most of us call God. After such a discovery, we are grateful to be a part—and only a part! We do not have to figure it all out, straighten it all out, or even do it perfectly by ourselves. We do not have to be God. It is an enormous weight off our backs. All we have to do is participate!”

I’ve been streaming a PBS series based on Thackeray’s novel, Vanity Fair. Each episode begins with this opening from the author: “Vanity Fair: where everyone is striving for what is not worth having.” To counter this vainglorious approach, St. Paul writes, “Seek what is above.” Jesus, the prophets, and spiritual guides teach us what is truly important: selfless love.

Thanks to all of you who participate today. Pray for healing and perseverance, and the grace, every day, to be thankful.