

They used to be thought of as cheap and disposable props on the movie sets of Hollywood. As films were being made, horses were shocked, tripped, and forced to run into trenches. Wires were strung around their ankles and then yanked by the rider to make the horse fall on cue. Six horses were killed during the filming of *Ben-Hur* in 1924, and 25 were killed or euthanized during *The Charge of the Light Brigade* in 1935.

Then an organization called “American Humane” got into the act and opened a Hollywood office to enforce standards for the protection of animals. In the ’50s, they sponsored the first of an annual PATSY award ceremony. Patsy standing for, The “Performing Animal Top Star of the Year” and you might say that it is the Academy Award for animal actors. Francis the Mule was the first PATSY winner in 1951, and later winners included Roy Rogers’ horse Trigger and Arnold the Pig from “*Green Acres*.” In 1973, an Animal Actor’s Hall of Fame was established, and Lassie was the first inductee.

If the “Performing Animal Top Star of the Year” award had been around in first-century Palestine, you might say that the animal that carried Jesus during his Triumphant entry into the city of Jerusalem certainly would have been the winner. That donkey definitely deserved a PATSY. Matthew tells us that Jesus sends two of his disciples into the village of Bethphage to fetch a donkey and a colt. This is to fulfill what had been spoken by the prophet Zechariah, “Look, your king is coming to you,” said the prophet, “humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

Jesus enters Jerusalem as Zechariah had predicted, and a large crowd spreads cloaks and branches on the road in front of him. They greet him as their king, shouting “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” It’s practically a Hollywood spectacle complete with the

rolling out of a red carpet with the garments that the people laid down upon the roadway. And as for the donkey, she plays her role as intended.

You might even say that we can learn a lot about serving Christ from the domesticated ass he rode in on. After all, the *disciples* are not particularly good Palm Sunday role models for us. They may stand with Jesus now, but in a matter of days one will betray him, another will deny him, and the rest will abandon him. Their argument as to who would be the greatest in the kingdom was still ringing hot in their ears. In fact, this whole trip made them nervous, what with Jesus talking about death and suffering, and with visions of a regime change disappearing like a mist in wind.

They had seen a lot, done a lot, listened a lot — but in the end, when Jesus gives them the faith test, the final exam, it turns out they're not much more than guru groupies that are practically clueless. Which if we are honest with ourselves, might be a description that many of us can relate to from time to time. We've followed Jesus for years now. We've sat in church, we dropped coins, bills, or checks into the offering plate, we've taught a class here, attended a Bible study there, been on Church council or on a Committee, we've done our part.

Although some of us, no doubt, have made it to the cross, and some of us have endured the fires of suffering and embraced the faith test and passed it convincingly, too many of us either don't know what it's like to follow Jesus into the storm, or we've bailed out as the storm approached. So, it's a pretty safe bet for us to conclude that the disciples are not the role models we're looking for in today's Palm Sunday and Passion narrative.

Nor are the *crowds*. They're worse than the disciples. They're curious, but not committed. In fact, their loyalties can be bought and sold. They're shouting "Hosanna to the Son of David" today, but soon they will reject Jesus and call for his death. New Testament scholar Eugene Boring points out that the members of

the *crowd* know the truth about Jesus, but they cannot bring themselves to *do* the truth. In other words, to live it out. They are like college students who make an A in a course on ethics ... but still flunk life.

These days, I'm certain we all agree that Jesus can still attract a crowd. His picture is on the cover of *Time* and *Newsweek* magazine at least twice a year, Easter and Christmas. People will flock to what Rex Miller, in his book *The Millennium Matrix*, calls "celebration" churches, where people can see a show — choreographed and stage-produced. But, as I just mentioned, the people waving palm branches and shouting, Save Us, are not necessarily the best role models either.

Ok, perhaps we can turn to the *religious leaders*. Actually, that is pretty comical and might make some of us spit out our drinks. It's a pretty laughable idea given the fact that in Scripture we observe the chief priests, scribes, and Pharisees as corrupt, mean-spirited, hypocritical, and jealous individuals. When Lazarus was raised from the dead, they conspired to put him right back in the tomb — where he belonged. They offered and took bribes. They solicited false testimony. They created a bogus trial. They sent an innocent man to his death.

Today, 95 percent of the pastors and priests and rabbis in this country are without a doubt caring, committed people. But it's the other 5 percent who've abused children, who fill the television screens asking for donations — many of which come from fixed-income viewers — and use those donations to pay for lawsuits, or sleek jets, extravagant mansions and a fleet of cars. These are the false shepherds whom God will someday strike down, and who in the meantime cause unbelievers to scoff.

So, what's left? Nothing, except the *patsy*, "top performer," donkey that I mentioned earlier. It is an animal that can teach us a lot, *because she is the creature who carries Christ into the world*. And that's what it's all about. Carrying

Christ into the world. The donkey was a Christ-bearer, or a *Christopher* (derived from the Greek *Christos* combined with *pherein* “meaning to bear, to carry”).

Today is an opportunity for us to take the name Christopher or the feminine *Christophera*, as our own. By doing so, we commit to bearing Christ into the world. And being a Christopher means: Serving Christ. It means being a faithful servant, even though it can be a burden. It means serving Christ humbly without caring who gets the glory. It’s all about following Christ’s direction; being willing to go where he wants us to go, not where we want to go. It means not getting spooked by the crowds, the noise, the attention. It means the possibility of taking Christ into enemy territory. Never asking Christ to “get off our backs.” Being willing to shed the “hero” image people wanted to pin on Jesus. Being obedient to the will of the One who holds the reins.

As we carry Christ into the world, we are challenged to do a particular kind of work, and to show a distinctively Christian lifestyle. This means letting love be genuine, hating what is evil, holding fast to what is good. It involves rejoicing in hope, being patient in suffering, and persevering in prayer. To live in this way means that we are going to contribute to the needs of the saints, extend hospitality to strangers, and even go so far as to bless those who persecute us. It means that when our whole city is “in turmoil,” as Jerusalem was on that Palm Sunday so long ago, and the people around us ask “Who is this?,” we’ll be able to give them an answer that shows them the way to everlasting peace and salvation.

If we can pull this off, and model our lives on the one character in today’s melodrama that deserves our emulation, we will discover the joy that comes from carrying Christ. We’ll know the glory of hearing hosannas, the thrill of close contact with Jesus, the excitement of accepting a challenge, and the deep satisfaction of knowing that we are walking in the way of God. In fact, you might

say that there's no better role we could be asked to perform. And thanks be to God for that! Amen.