

Palm Sunday, as you may already know, is named for the “leafy branches” that people placed on the road in front of Jesus, as he journeyed into Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. It’s also the day we think of crowds shouting “Hosanna,” as Jesus entered the Holy City of the Israelites in triumph, hailed as the “the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” Palm Sunday is a day of celebration, with people cheering for the One they hoped would usher in “the kingdom of our ancestor David!”

What we usually don’t think about, however, is the colt that Jesus rode into town (that day), described by St. Matthew as “the foal of a donkey” and by John’s Gospel as “a donkey’s colt.” And that’s a shame! Because today could easily be called “Donkey Sunday.”

Unfortunately, donkeys have “a bad reputation,” says archaeologist Fiona Marshall. “They’re considered stupid, and stubborn, and lowly.” But this is an unfair and inaccurate assessment. Donkeys are “extremely intelligent,” she says. “Whole trade routes were built on donkeys, and the wealth of ancient Egypt depended on them.”

You know why the donkey went to the bank, don’t you? He needed to *burro* some money. Donkeys are even smart enough to celebrate holidays. Around Christmas, they send out Mule-tide greetings

Many years ago, traders went all the way from the Middle East to China, along with their donkeys. And in the Tang Dynasty, high-class women played a game like polo, in which players rode donkeys instead of horses. When one particular noblewoman died, she had donkeys sacrificed and buried with her, so that she could continue to ride them in the afterlife. Stupid, stubborn and lowly? That was *not* the reputation of donkeys in ancient China.

I’m certain we can all agree that Jesus knew what he was doing when he made his preparations to enter Jerusalem. He sent two of his disciples ahead of

him, saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it.” Jesus was taking his chances with an unbroken colt, but he knew that the animal was intelligent, not stupid.

Predicting that the two disciples would encounter resistance, he said to them, “If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’” Jesus must have realized that he would have to get people talking, if he was going to gather a crowd on the road to Jerusalem. So, he had his followers spread the word that the Lord needed a donkey, and he would return it right away.

Jesus was building a buzz among the people of the village. Creating controversy. Injecting some suspense. Sure enough, the disciples went into the village and found a colt in the street, just as Jesus predicted. And as they were untying it, people confronted them, just as Jesus said they would. When they told them what Jesus had said, the people allowed the disciples to take it. And predictably the donkey was cooperative, not stubborn.

The disciples brought the colt to Jesus, threw their cloaks on it, and Jesus sat on it and began to ride it toward Jerusalem. He knew that the prophet Zechariah had predicted that the coming ruler of God’s people would arrive in Jerusalem on a donkey: “Lo, your king comes to you,” said the prophet; “triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

In ancient times, leaders would typically ride donkeys in civil processions, and horses in military ones, so a king arriving on a donkey would indicate that he was arriving in peace. Jesus remembered that Solomon had been riding a donkey when he was recognized as the new king of Israel. The donkey was noble, not lowly.

St. Mark tells us that many people “spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields.” But what were these leafy branches compared to the beast that Jesus was riding? The animal was intelligent, cooperative, and noble — a heroic donkey! Yes, one might say that today really should be called Donkey Sunday, not Palm Sunday.

Then the people “who went ahead and those who followed 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!’” Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of Zechariah by entering Jerusalem as the ruler of God’s people, humble and riding on a donkey. And after riding the animal to the temple, he went out to Bethany with his disciples. Along the way, it is safe to assume that he probably took the time to return the colt to its owner.

Jesus made a conscious decision to ride a donkey into Jerusalem, not a horse. “Horses are speedy,” writes author and journalist Christopher McDougall, “but when it comes to steadiness, stamina, and heroic resistance to heat, cold and thirst, you can’t do better than a burro.” McDougall is not surprised that people of all stripes — prophets, Mary, Jesus, King Solomon, Muhammad, and even Queen Victoria — have made donkeys their favorite form of transport. Even George Washington, who was described by Thomas Jefferson as “the greatest horseman of his age,” was actually a donkey guy. When King George of Spain gave a pair of burros to Washington, he turned them into America’s only breeding herd.

So, you might be wondering, what can Donkey Sunday teach us about being a person who carries Jesus in the world? That’s our challenge, when you think about it. Although we don’t act as pack animals, as disciples of Christ, we are called to carry Jesus forward in the decisions we make, and more importantly in the actions we take.

Like donkeys, we make our decisions with God-given intelligence. Francis Collins, director of the National Institutes of Health, is a widely respected physician and geneticist. He led the Human Genome Project and has been very involved in containing the coronavirus pandemic. Collins is also a deeply committed Christian who has worked hard to find harmony between science and biblical faith.

A journalist recently asked him about what he hoped Christians would understand about science. He answered, “Think of science as a gift from the Creator. The curiosity that we have been instilled with to understand how the universe works can inspire even greater awe of the Creator. This gift could hardly be a threat to God, the author of it all. Celebrate what science can teach us. Think of science as a form of worship.” Collins believes that we should all make our decisions with God-given curiosity and intelligence.

On Donkey Sunday, we should also take actions that are cooperative, not adversarial. This means working alongside our neighbors to serve a world in need, without constantly competing for resources, power, or influence. Now it is certainly true that we should be committed to the foundations of our faith, holding fast to our belief that Jesus “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.” We’ll be remembering this line from the Apostles’ Creed as we make our way through Holy Week.

But being committed is not the same thing as being stubborn. We can work alongside people of different faiths, as well as people of no faith, to feed the hungry. A Christian named Greg Damhorst tells the story of a campus event in which he packaged meals for Haiti. The event was planned by an evangelical Christian, a Catholic, a Buddhist, a Hindu, and a Humanist. “In a single weekend,” he reports, “5,112 volunteers from every walk of life, faith and philosophical tradition passed through that site to lend a hand. In less than 12 hours, 1,012,640

meals were packaged for shipment to Haiti where they were distributed by Salvation Army humanitarian workers.” The event was a story “of coming together,” he writes, “a story of cooperation . . . a story of interfaith work.” No one felt the need to debate the Apostles’ Creed.

Finally, we serve our Lord as people with God-given nobility. Like the donkey who carried Jesus, we can walk through the world with confidence and grace. “You are a chosen race,” said Peter in his first letter, “a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.” As God’s royal people, you should hold your heads high and never feel that you are second-class citizens in this world. But this standing is not intended to make us feel superior to others. Instead, it is a status designed for service, “in order that we may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

Intelligent, cooperative, noble. That’s the character of the heroic donkey. And you might even say they are excellent traits for any and all Christians who desire to carry Jesus forward in everything they think, do, and say. Amen.