

Palm Sunday is one of those dates in the calendar that everyone knows about. Many people remember this day when you receive your palm cross. The marking of Palm Sunday is a significant day in our calendar because it marks the final journey that Jesus will take towards the cross, and ultimately what he was destined for, to conquer death.

But for me, I always on this day, move my attention away from the palm, and actually shine the spotlight on the one who served in order to bring the glory to Jesus. Who's that then? Well it's the donkey isn't it. He serves by being available and carries in obedience the King of Kings on his final journey.

Whenever I was young, we used to play a game that was all about a donkey. It was a simple little game. It involved throwing a tennis ball between friends who were well spread apart - usually across a field. And when one person dropped the ball, they would be given the next letter in the word donkey - D O N K E Y. However if you dropped the ball on the last letter, the 'y', you were then mocked all day by your mates calling you a donkey, going round all day bleating 'ee-aw-ee-aw'. I know folks. We lived a very simple life back then. It takes very little to amuse the innocent they say.

But the butt of all the jokes seems to be on the donkey. And yet JESUS instructs his disciples to go and get not just one animal but two – a donkey and its colt. About 200 years before Jesus rode into Jerusalem, Judas Maccabees rode up the same road in triumph, after leading a successful revolt against foreign rule. And there's a real sense in which the people of Jesus' day were expecting a repeat performance, which is why our second horse is such a disappointment. In fact some have considered that alongside those who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem, there may have been others who saw the entry as an opportunity to mock because of what they would expect from a great leader.

And yet this is what Jesus chose - he chose a Donkey and its colt. So today I want to make you think about the question WHY. Why choose a donkey to fulfil his plan for the world?

Here's the first thing to think about - this donkey and its colt are not just randomly picked. The donkey was selected by the Lord. It was no accident. And therefore we should never downplay when God chooses us.

Jesus had already made arrangements to use the donkey ahead of time. Remember what the passage says – it says that he sent the disciples on to a village where the donkey would be waiting with her colt. And the disciples were to untie them and bring them to him, and if anyone was to ask they were to tell them that the Lord needed them. The other gospel writers state that these animals had never been used before. These animals, their whole life was building up to this moment.

And the fact is folks, that God has done the very same thing with us. If you don't believe me then let's read John 15:16 - You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.

So you may think this morning, well I have nothing to offer. We're all stuck at home, and there's nothing we can do right now. That's one opinion. But if you are open to what God will do in you, it will amaze you what could be in store for you, for this parish, and for the kingdom. Right now you could be phoning around parishioners and letting them know that you care. Remember the Tesco's slogan – every little helps. All of us are here for a reason, even now in these strange times. And here's what Paul says about this to the church in Ephesus (2:10) “we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do”.

I wonder at this time as we spend more time at home, how are you using it? Some may be very proud that they've got their gardens in order. Some of you have maybe had the opportunity to clear out the garage. But have you spent any time considering that maybe God wants this period of stillness to prepare you for what is to come in your life? You might think you are a bit like a donkey - really nothing special, but maybe this has been the moment that God has been preparing in advance for you to do? Ask yourself this question, will I be different when this coronavirus is over? If we all come back to church at the end of this time, and just carry on as if nothing has happened, then can I suggest that this time has been wasted. God is calling us to be ready to serve, even if we think we're not that useful.

The other thing I want you to think about today is the role of service which this animal took on. Today, the first Sunday in the month would have been our Communion Services, and at the end of the communion, we pray a prayer together. It's based on Romans 12, and it says this :

Almighty God,
we thank you for feeding us
with the spiritual food
of the body and blood of your Son Jesus Christ.
Through him we offer you our souls and bodies to be a living
sacrifice.
Send us out in the power of your Spirit
to live and work to your praise and glory. Amen.

Paul is urging that we offer ourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God - this Paul says is your true and proper worship.

That means that we come before God without our agenda, without anything that we think is important. We come not knowing what God would do with us, but we come open to serve him. That folks is worship.

The donkey has placed himself in a position of less importance. He is satisfied to play a humble part for the good of his master's will. We all have a similar role in God's plan, not to be exalted, not to complain when we feel our egos are a bit damaged, but instead to exalt Christ. Corrie Ten Boom was a famous Christian whose testimony of suffering in Nazi concentration camps and God's grace through it all touched millions of lives worldwide. On an occasion where she received an honorary degree from a University, she was asked if it was difficult to remain humble while hearing so much acclaim. She replied with these words "Young man, when Jesus Christ rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday on the back of a donkey, and everyone was waving palm branches and throwing garments in the road and singing praises, do you think that for one moment it ever entered the head of that donkey that any of that was for him?" She continued, "If I can be the donkey on which Jesus Christ rides in His glory, I give him all the praise and all the honour"

In these times that we are facing, what are the humble acts that you and I can be involved in, where it's no longer about our agenda, about getting the garden looking well, or whatever it might be, but instead focusing our attention on others, and actually becoming that living sacrifice offering ourselves in service to God, in obedience. In these days that might be about volunteering your time to the NHS, it might be offering your time to Together Ballyclare to help people who are isolated or on lockdown.

Whatever it might be, let's in these days know that God has called us to his service, and then in recognition of that, are we willing to be servants of his. If he can use a little donkey, imagine what he can do when you say yes to his service. Don't ever be surprised that he could use little old you. Just be open and willing, and then serve him.