The Cinema

October 3rd, 2021

One of my favourite characters in the history of film is not a human being but a donkey named Balthasar. He is a major character in the film *Au Hasard Balthazar* by Robert Bresson (1966). The film came out at a time when the world was falling apart. That was the year my father was drafted. That was the year that revolution and civil war broke out in many countries. That was the year that cities were destroyed by earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes and floods. That was the year of riots, assassinations, executions. That was the year Time magazine had a cover story “Is God Dead?” And in the midst of this confusion and terror, a man made a film with a donkey as its main character. It would seem offensive to some, but it was an act of pure courage. Though Ingmar Bergman admired Bresson, he famously stated: “this Balthazar, I didn't understand a word of it, it was so completely boring... A donkey, to me, is completely uninteresting, but a human being is always interesting” (Nico Baumbach, “On Robert Bresson and Filmed Animals”, in *Fiction International,* 40. Animals. 2007). Another famous director, Jean-Luc Godard, who had views quite contrary to Bresson’s, loved the film, exclaiming: “"Everyone who sees this film will be absolutely astonished…because this film is really the world in an hour and a half." I only encountered this film a few weeks ago—and I was shocked that such a film was possible, and I agreed with Godard’s assessment. I have always loved donkeys anyway, from the first time I rode them in Hokkaido and first read of them in the Gospels. Many of you have heard me speak of them in sermons before. Bresson’s film is the most interesting study of character, not just characterization, that I have ever seen; it is a modern visual parable. What is character? Character is the beginning of hope. The apostle Paul says: “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Romans 5:1-5).

Balthazar the donkey is in one sense just a donkey. In another sense, he is a figure in a parable, and as such, he represents character. Originally, the Greek word for character, used in our New Testament reading today, is δοκιμή, *dokime*, meaning “a trial, proof; tried, approved character”, “proof of genuineness ("approval, through testing"), a brand of what is ‘tested and true.’” (Strong’s 1382). That kind of character can only be produced through endurance, through longsuffering, through pain, if you will. Like gold or silver refined in fire. And there are many scenes in the movie wherein Balthazar suffers the blows of angry workers, of disgruntled youths, of his various owners who force him to perform various tasks, whether it is hauling heavy loads, milling grain, performing in a circus and so on. Balthazar is surrounded by frauds, drunks, rapists, profiteers, abusers—by a world of sin. And he suffers for that sin; he works within it. There are moments of tenderness, to be sure, but they are not the norm. The hopeful thing is that Balthazar never ceases to be Balthazar. In a Kierkegaardian sense, he is the antithesis to despair; he is pure of heart and he is himself before God, like Balaam’s donkey, who could see the angel with the sword that Balaam could not see. Perhaps the first Japanese sermon that ever made a lasting impression on me was by a veterinarian who was working at the Sapporo Agricultural College. He was a young, well-read man who always noticed animals in literature. He introduced me to Franz Kafka—telling me how terrified he had been reading of a man waking up as an insect. And he was the one who taught me about innocence—that Balaam’s donkey had no sin: “When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it lay down under Balaam; and Balaam’s anger was kindled, and he struck the donkey with his staff. Then the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey, and it said to Balaam, ‘What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?’ Balaam said to the donkey, ‘Because you have made a fool of me! I wish I had a sword in my hand! I would kill you right now!’ But the donkey said to Balaam, ‘Am I not your donkey, which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I been in the habit of treating you in this way?’ And he said, ‘No.’ Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road, with his drawn sword in his hand” (Numbers 22:27-31). Balaam’s donkey has more character than Balaam, and it has a purity that enables it to see heavenly things. We lose our ability to see heavenly things when we lose our innocence or cease to prize innocence itself. Innocence is not naiveté; it is not ignorance; it is not even necessarily sinlessness. The world of *Au Hasard Balthazar* is a world of Balaams, just like our world today. The donkey, however, sees and points us to things we otherwise would not see through its silence, innocence and endurance. Through its character.

In the end of the film, the meaning of which has been debated by film critics, theologians, existentialists, Balthazar is forced by smugglers to carry some contraband. In an exchange of gunfire between the smugglers and the customs guards, Balthazar is mortally wounded. With the last of his strength, he wanders into an empty field, where he is suddenly surrounded by sheep, as if they are welcoming him into the kingdom of heaven. Balthazar completes his life journey without becoming or being anything other than the innocent donkey. In some ways, he is similar to Leon Morin, the priest of the eponymous film (*Leon Morin, Priest* 1961) by Jean-Pierre Melville, who despite temptations and challenges, maintains his integrity and helps Communists, Fascist collaborators, an adulterous prostitute, and other people in a mountain village return to Christ. That is a wonderful film, by the way, starring Emmanuelle Riva and Jean-Paul Belmondo. The media and our own suspicions based on experience want us to believe that innocence and character are nonexistent. They may not be common—but they are not nonexistent. I have known people like the priest Leon Morin, and I do believe that goodness and innocence can withstand the ravages of this world. I even believe that lost innocence can be regained. Is this not why Christ rode into Jerusalem on a donkey? Is not the life and death of Christ sufficient evidence that our hope is born from this kind of commitment, this kind of innocent endurance? As Paul says, “Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope” (Romans 5:3-4). This is the gospel that has been excised from many churches today. This is the gospel we desperately do not want to hear. This is the gospel that says I must suffer, I must sacrifice, I must overcome temptation, I must be content with not winning, I must endure the irrationality of others, I must endure poverty or anonymity, I must wander from place to place, not always knowing what the narrative of my life is about, but trusting God to write the script for me.

The gospel is not horsepower and it is not war horses. As the Psalm reading today says: “A king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength. The war horse is a vain hope for victory, and by its great might it cannot save. Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine” (Psalm 33:16-19). In antiquity, owning a horse was a sign of wealth and prestige. Solomon made special orders for his horses: “Thus King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. The whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind. Every one of them brought a present, objects of silver and gold, garments, weaponry, spices, horses, and mules, so much year by year. Solomon gathered together chariots and horses; he had fourteen hundred chariots and twelve thousand horses, which he stationed in the chariot cities and with the king in Jerusalem. The king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stones, and he made cedars as numerous as the sycomores of the Shephelah. Solomon’s import of horses was from Egypt and Kue, and the king’s traders received them from Kue at a price. A chariot could be imported from Egypt for six hundred shekels of silver, and a horse for one hundred and fifty; so through the king’s traders they were exported to all the kings of the Hittites and the kings of Aram” (1 Kings 10:23-29). In election after election, we ask for a good economy; we want to import and consume the best of everything; we want silver as common as stones; we want chariots and horses. In churches, we are often the same—we want Solomon’s kingdom instead of the kingdom of the heaven; we want the horsepower, however we may interpret that. And the gospel is not horsepower; it is a carpenter riding a donkey into the city.

The endurance, obedience, humility, and innocence of the donkey are not just symbolic. They are indeed practical and hopeful. Not just for the next life, either. I have never learned anything useful or helpful to others without some kind of endurance or suffering, without some kind of obedience or humility. I am often thought naïve, and that is fine. Regardless of what people think, one still has to work and bear the burdens meant to be borne. At the end of Bresson’s film, the donkey that was cursed and beaten nevertheless did the work. The work was done. The work other people depended on. What I have learned more recently, however, goes beyond even that; I have learned that what looks asinine to others can indeed be the very thing that assists them. What looks simplistic, hard, or counterintuitive can bring enlightenment and illumination. There are things donkeys can teach that horses cannot, things that bring helpful clarity and hope. In 2 Peter, the apostle suggests that Balaam’s donkey brings such clarity; the epistle describes a chaotic world: “They slander what they do not understand…They count it a pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are blots and blemishes, revelling in their dissipation while they feast with you. They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed…They have left the straight road and have gone astray, following the road of Balaam son of Bosor, who loved the wages of doing wrong, but was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with a human voice and restrained the prophet’s madness” (2 Peter 2:12-16). I want to repeat that last verse: *A speechless donkey spoke with a human voice and restrained the prophet’s madness.* There is a need in this world for the simplicity, humility, and long-suffering of the donkey.Apparently, Robert Bresson based his film on a passage from *The Idiot* by Dostoyevsky. This was a remarkable discovery for me—one of my favourite films based on one of my favourite books, a book that has been a traveling companion for almost thirty years! In *The Idiot,* when traveling from Russia to Switzerland to find a cure for his health problems, Prince Myshkin falls into a great depression. Everything in western Europe seems strange to him. Myshkin says, “I completely recovered from this depression, as I recall, one night after I had reached Switzerland and was in Basel, when I was awakened by the braying of a donkey in the marketplace. The donkey made a great impression on me and for some reason pleased me intensely, and at the same time everything seemed to clear up in my head...From that time on I developed a great fondness for donkeys; it’s even a kind of special affection. I began to ask questions about them, because I had never really seen them before, and I was immediately convinced that it is the most useful of animals, hardworking, strong, patient, cheap, and long-suffering” (Fyodor Dostoyevsky. *The Idiot.* Tr. Henry and Olga Carlisle. Signet, 2002. 57-58). Straying from the Lord is madness. It is the worst possible thing a person can do with their life. All of the chaos that you see around you today comes from straying from the Lord. And if the humble donkey was able to restrain Balaam’s madness and relieve the depression of a prince, maybe we need to learn from the donkey and become like the donkey. In a significant scene of Jean-Luc-Godard’s science fiction film noir *Alphaville* (1965), Anna Karina’s character speaks of words that have gone missing—the totalitarian regime erases words from the dictionary from time to time, and she does not want to lose certain words that were precious to her: *Robin redbreast. Weep. Autumn light. Tenderness.* And of course, the word *conscience.* I cannot conceive of a concept of conscience without a concept of innocence. I cannot conceive of conscience without longsuffering, without endurance, without character. The world seems mad today, and maybe that madness needs the braying of a donkey, or even donkeys restraining us with human words.

It was a donkey that bore Christ into Jerusalem. Nobody alone can fix this world. Yet, I believe there is one thing that we can do—and that is to be like donkeys, bearing the King of Kings into the city. It is God working through the burdens we bear who will reveal the glory of Zion. I have revisited some old films with you today, films that might be too slow for our times, but films that were deeply prophetic about our times. Our world is held together by longsuffering, by endurance. Imagine the anonymous lab workers who worked on the vaccines for years. Imagine the anonymous lab workers who administer covid tests and the other lab workers who process the results. Imagine the anonymous workers delivering food to the world during the pandemic. Imagine the anonymous people who do not walk out of their jobs and keep the traffic lights running, the water running, the electricity going, the container ships floating, aircraft flying, the garbage collected, the clothing tailored, the cobalt and lithium and neodymium mined. Not everything is automated, and even what is automated still requires the attention and discretion of human character. Not everything that glitters is gold, but everything golden has thousands, millions of person-years of labor and endurance making it light up the darkness. There is nothing naïve, simplistic, or irrelevant about innocence and conscience, about simplicity and longsuffering, about character. They are ingredients of hope. The great cinema of existence is written and directed by God, and it is God who will bring about the ending. Though we are actors, we are actors who are really spectators, waiting for the final revelation of the Director and Scriptwriter’s grace and redemption for the world. As the apostle Paul says: “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18); “What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?” (Romans 8:31-32). I want my ending to be like Balthazar’s—I want to be surrounded by sheep, in the presence of the Good Shepherd. Carry Christ today, tomorrow and every day. Stay on the straight road. And be like the donkey. For that is how character is formed, and that is how hope is born.