

Terror on every side - Palm Sunday 2023

There is a wise old saying that when you find yourself up to your oxters in alligators, it's time to get out of the swamp. For those of you a little unsighted as to where exactly your oxters are, let me reassure you that none of the crown jewels are in danger - the oxters are your armpit or axilla.

The aphorism has the element of practicality about it, but it rather presupposes that you can outrun the danger in which you find yourself, or, in the image we are given - outswim the alligators. Good luck with that.

I told you a story about Jesus' donkey before, and I am not going to repeat it - it is there for

you to find on the website if you want to re-read it, or I can give you a copy.

This year I want to talk about something a little less anodyne. I am not suggesting that there were alligators in the gospel that haven't been recognized, but I feel drawn to pointing your attention to the situation in which Jesus finds himself on this first Palm Sunday.

I start by asking you why you think Jesus would go to the trouble of finding a donkey to ride on into Jerusalem? Let's face it, most of the time - indeed, at all other times we hear of Jesus going to Jerusalem, he is walking, as far as we know. I think it's fairly safe to assume that, as the gospel goes to such pains

to tell us that he is riding a donkey this time - so it is obviously a change from what he would normally have done.

There are many reasons given for why a donkey was chosen by Jesus, and perhaps the most appropriate one is that a donkey is a symbol of peace, whereas a horse would be associated with war and military might. Thus, Jesus' statement made by riding a donkey is that he comes in peace, and not as any sort of threat to the occupying Roman authorities, despite what they may have heard.

There is greater theological significance as well, because the donkey is the beast of burden that made human survival possible, it is redeemed by giving a lamb to the priest in the

Temple. The donkey is a bridge between the material and the holy, and is redeemed like the firstborn son, no less. If it is not redeemed, it must be killed.

In this way, although the disciples probably didn't understand it at the time, Jesus is coming as that bridge for us - the connection between the material and the holy - the earthly and the divine, and is God's firstborn Son - the lamb that is slain for our redemption.

But now I want to do something quite absurd - I want us to try and enter into Jesus' human mind at the time of his so-called 'triumphal entry' into Jerusalem.

Imagine, if you can, that for the last three years - off and on - you have been telling your raggedy band of followers that you are heading for a nasty end in Jerusalem. They variously scoff, deny, or align themselves with the concept - but generally, I doubt they realize that anything bad will come to pass; after all, their leader is a miracle-worker, he can do anything - why should or even could anything nasty happen to him?

So let us consider what Jesus is thinking as he rides on the dusty road into the city of Jerusalem. Palms are thrown in front of his donkey, the people shout a welcome of praise, as if for a victorious returning general - but they've got it all wrong - and Jesus knows this.

He is also acutely aware of what the next few days hold in store for him. This same crowd that is fêting him now, will all too soon be baying for his blood. Not his disciples, perhaps, but they will also be gone like morning mist in the sunrise - wholesale desertion. Echoes of protestation - 'Let us go and die with him! - I will never leave you! - this will never happen to you , Lord! - must have rung hollow in his ears along with the meaningless shouts of 'Hosanna!' - too soon to change to the guttural cries of 'Crucify him!' - in less than a week.

Do we suspect that Jesus felt cynical at this point? Or sympathetic to the crowd's

optimism? Or just plain sad at how easily the fickle hearts of human beings can be changed from adoration to hatred.

But I am missing out on something far more important, I feel - and the reason I picked this image for my art gallery.

Many years ago , Sheila and I had a friend who had a croft in the Scottish highlands, in a place called Ardnamurchan. He kept sheep there, but occasionally one of his sheep would get stuck in mud, and then they were helpless, and unless he heard their cries for help, the hooded crows would come and pluck out their eyes, and they would die, blind, and slowly, of starvation and meningitis.

This image reminded me of his croft and his sheep. Here we have a similar situation, where a ewe is desperately trying to protect her lamb who appears either hurt or dead, as there is blood coming from its mouth. The surrounding crows are just beginning to lose their patience, as the circle is closing in, and some are becoming brave enough to fly threateningly around the mother's head.

Imagine this crowd with palm leaves in their hands for a moment - and now imagine them again, as here, closing in for the kill, waving their fists and crowing for death.

Jesus must have known what he was about to face; do you think he rode into that crowd on Palm Sunday with a sense of joy - or horror?

He knew he was up to his oxters in alligators - but for him there was no way out of the swamp, and he could not out-swim them if he was to do his Father's will.

I have entitled this sermon, 'Terror on every side', from the Psalm that we read. It seems to me that Jesus could well have felt terror on every side - even though he was entering to shouts of 'Hosanna!.

Look at the Philippians reading: 'he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!' Look at my art gallery again, and see what that obedience to his Father's will cost him. His heart and mind must have been in complete turmoil as he wrestled with

what he knew lay before him. No wonder the palm goes on. '...My times are in your hands; deliver me from the hands of my enemies,' Did he not pray as much in the garden of Gethsemane? - but I am getting ahead of myself, and too far into the week coming - so stay with me this week for the rest of the greatest drama the world will ever know.

It has rightly been said that you cannot know how another person feels unless you have walked a mile in their shoes - or moccasins, or crocs. So let us not gaily think that Palm Sunday is a wonderful feast of celebration. Imagine instead, the sunshine in the valley as you see the thunderclouds amassing quietly

over Mount Cheam, covering the snow top, and menacing the little town of Agassiz, and our famous wind just beginning to pick up and start dust-devils along the roads. Believe me - just as Jesus was acutely aware of what was in store for him, so, too, are the alligators out there for you; being a Christian is no easy ride, so you had better learn to ride that donkey before you get thrown off and land in the swamp. I suggest your best bet is to say with the psalmist, 'Let your face shine on your servant; save me in your unfailing love.'

You had better start asking for mercy and grace, because if you start looking for justice,

the next time you look in a mirror, you may just see a sheep.