

April 2, 2023 - Palm Sunday
Bonni – Belle Pickard

Pre-service music:

Jesus Christ is waiting – StF 251

Seek ye first – StF 254

The kingdom of God is justice and joy – StF 255

Ride on, ride on in majesty – StF 265

==ORDER OF SERVICE==

Call to Worship – Psalm 118:12, 19-29

Make Way – StF 264

Matthew 21:1-11

All glory, laud, and honour -- StF 262

Meditation – “The Guy with the Donkey”

Take My Life – StF 566

Intercessions/Lord’s Prayer

From Heaven you came (The Servant King) – StF 272

Benediction –

Psalm 118 (extracts paraphrased from the Message)

Thank God, because God is good.

Because God's love never quits.

**Tell the world, all you who love God,
"God's love never quits!"**

Far better to take refuge in God

Than trust in people;

**Far better to take refuge in God
Than trust in celebrities.**

Blessed are you who enter in God's name –

From God's house we bless you!

God is God, he has bathed us in light.

Decorate God's house with garlands and banners!

Thank God -- God is so good!

"God's love never quits!"

Matthew 21:1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives,

Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them,

'Go into the village ahead of you,

and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her;

untie them and bring them to me.

If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them."

And he will send them immediately.'

This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

'Tell the daughter of Zion,

Look, your king is coming to you,

humble, and mounted on a donkey,

and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them;

they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them.

A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road,

and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

'Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?'

The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'

Meditation:

“Go to the town you can see there.
When you enter it,
You will quickly find a donkey tied there with its colt.
Untie them and bring them to me.
If anyone asks you why you are taking the donkeys,
Say that the Master needs them,
And he will send them at once.”

Right. Strange story.

There used to be a popular video game called Grand Auto Theft
And this sounds a bit like that premises:
“See that town up there? Go steal the first form of transport you see.”
Commandeering... maybe even a little bullying...
But that doesn't sound like the Jesus we know, does it?

Other preachers have suggested that perhaps this was an inside job...
Jesus already had somebody lined up with a spare donkey in the next town?
Not only that, but with a spare colt as well?
Just waiting for the right one to come and ask...

Hmmm... That doesn't really sound like Jesus either,
He wouldn't really need a donkey, would he?
Because he'd walk -- on water, if necessary...
And if he did need a donkey,
He'd say a blessing and one would appear...
Or he'd just put out the word
For folks to keep an eye out for what was needed...
Wouldn't it be like that?

Or maybe that's just an idea of what's “nice and polite”
Getting mixed up with what God's about...
Actually, the more I learn about God,
The more I realise it's not all about being nice and polite—
It's about respecting other folks, sure,
But it's also about God making clear what's needed for the situation
And giving me the opportunity to answer...

Some time ago I was reading a book by Max Lucado,
A preacher/writer from Texas whose books I met in India...
In this book, called, “And the Angels Were Silent”,
Max is writing about the run-up to Easter
And thinking through all the things that happened...

Max is a very entertaining writer,
So I'm going to read you part of his chapter entitled, “The Guy with the Donkey”
Because I think he sets up the situation well...
He's been wondering about how the guy with the donkey felt
To suddenly have his donkey commandeered..
How did he know it was the Lord that wanted the donkey?

What did it feel like to give it?
Did it make him feel proud to see it being used for a noble purpose?
Or was he annoyed?
As Max is pondering the donkey owner's situation,
He ponders his own as well...

[p 38, para 3 – p 39 para 1]

“... Sometimes I get the impression that God wants me to give him something,
and sometimes I don't give it because I don't know for sure,
and then I feel bad because I've messed my chance.
Other times I know he wants something but I don't give it because I'm too selfish.
And other times, too few times, I hear him and I obey him
and feel honoured that a gift of mine would be used to carry Jesus into another place.
And still other times I wonder if my little deeds today will make a difference in the long haul.

Maybe you have those questions, too.
All of us have a donkey.
You and I each have something in our lives, which, if given back to God,
could, like the donkey, move Jesus and his story further down the road.
Maybe you can sing or hug or programme a computer or speak Swahili or with a cheque.

Whichever, that's your donkey.

Whichever, your donkey belongs to him.

It really does belong to him.
Your gifts are his and the donkey was his.
The original wording of the instructions Jesus gave to his disciples is proof:
“If anyone asks you why you are taking the donkey, you are to say, ‘Its Lord is in need.’”

The language Jesus used is the language of a royal levy.
It was an ancient law that required the citizen to render to the king
any item of service he or one of his emissaries might request.
In making such a request, Jesus is claiming to be king.
He is speaking as one in authority.
He is stating that as king he has rights to any possession of his subjects.”

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Max goes on to talk about various other people in the Bible
Who found themselves being asked to provide things that God needed –
“Rahab's rope, Pauls' bucket, David's sling, Samson's jawbone...”
The inescapable fact of these stories, story after story,
Is that sometimes – well, very often – well, most of the time! –
God needs US to provide something that God needs to use!

Hmph. So much for private ownership.
So much for all the hard work I spent to get this particular thing --
It sounds very much like if I'm committing to following Jesus,
God will soon be asking of me everything I've got!
Don't know if I want to get into all that...
Maybe it's safer just to pretend that I don't hear God asking...
After all, lots of people seem to be doing that all the time,

And, as far as I can see, God doesn't come down and zap them --
At least right away...

I grew up with the hard-working protestant work ethic.
You got what you deserved,
And lazy ones didn't deserve to get much of anything...
And then I got to India and found people working twice as hard as I
And getting next to nothing.

I've never been able to get past my upbringing of working hard...
But I have gained a new understanding of what the work is about
And where the rewards come for.

It's this: ultimately all that I have comes from God.
I need to work hard, not so that I can be rewarded with material goods and wealth
But because God has given me abilities and talents and things and material goods
So that I can use them in helpful, productive ways --
Ways that build up God's kingdom.

What I have is God's gift to me.
How I use what I have is my gift to God.
My donkey.

This is the time of year when I'm often working with several Nominations Committees
Across the circuit --
The really good part about working with Nominations Committees
Is that we have a chance to see how God is actually working with different people
Calling them to use their diverse talents and experience --
Sometimes we get to witness God calling people to do things
That we had no idea they could do --
But they say "yes" and amazing things happen!

Sometimes working with these Nom Coms is discouraging,
Because so many people seem reluctant to commit to taking on a new responsibility,
And indeed, many of the positions that need to be filled are heavy responsibilities:
Treasurers and property stewards and church and circuit stewards are all needed.
And we'd all like to think that someone else could fill those roles...
But along the way with the various Nom Coms, there have been yeses as well --
Some not sure exactly what God is calling them to, but God is definitely calling...
The Lord is at work in our midst --
Right here, right now, with ordinary donkey-owners like you and me! --
Who are saying "Yes" to God's requests --

...Which might be making a few of you a little nervous right now --
"Next thing you know, she's going to be asking ME to do things --
Maybe even hand over my car for the Lord's use!"

Not "me" asking -- but God --
And not God asking to *deprive* you,
But to bless you.

We're often still back in the feudal mode of thinking –
Like God is a feudal landlord
Out to strip us of all we have
In return for the tiny plot of land on which we pour out our life's blood,
So that He gets all the power
And we're left with nothing.

God's not like that.
God's power grows as it is shared.
God chooses to share the power with us
In order that we can share it with others
And the power will keep growing!

What I have is God's gift to me.
How I use what I have is my gift to God.
My donkey.

There's a verse from Matthew's gospel that comes shortly before today's reading.
It says: "Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters
or father or mother or children or fields for my sake
Will receive a hundred times more –
And will inherit eternal life."

If we examine that a bit, we find that the practice of giving is close to God's heart
And can bring us closer to God's heart as well...
It's not just about giving from our excess –
A few pounds in the collection plate
Or a few extra tins for the homeless from our weekly shop –
It's talking about the kind of giving that reflects our gratitude:
I want to give you something that shows how much I appreciate you
And what you have done for me.
And in this passage, it's not just about *giving* something
But about giving *up* something that might be getting in the way
Of giving ourselves totally to what God needs from us.
Indeed, the 'gifts' that Jesus describes in this passage are rather substantial:
Houses! Family members! 'Fields' – which would mean our livelihood!
We might think of these more as sacrifices,
Which raises the question:
What things, closest to me, does God might need me to give back
In order to be closer to God?
It's not about giving up so that we can bargain with God –
'I gave all this up for you, so now you have to do what I want'
It's about recognising that all we have ultimately comes from God
So if those things are becoming more precious to us that God is,
Then perhaps it's time to give them back to God
So that our relationship with God is stronger.

And the secret that Jesus is trying to share here
Is that God, the most generous giver, will always give back even more abundantly
It's recognising that God is the most generous giver –

The one who loves us more than we can imagine
The only one who can provide for us more than we can dream...

In my own life I think of the various pianos I have 'owned' –
Most of these have been gifts given to me –
And they have been dear to my heart and fingers and ears –
And, partly because I've moved so many times,
I've often had to part with precious pianos
In order to move to the new place God needed me to be.

But each time, a new piano has come my way, a new gift from unexpected quarters.
Most recently, the piano I had at the beginning of lockdown died a natural death –
And suddenly I found myself with a sum of money sufficient
To buy myself the piano of my dreams.
God's generosity doesn't run out!

Similarly, over the years, I've had to turn over to God various family members –
At least their close proximity to me—
First when I moved to India, leaving my parents and siblings behind,
Then to the States, leaving close friends and colleagues and students behind,
Then to England, this time leaving daughters and friends behind --
And all the other small moves in between
Where I was parted with people I had come to love...
But each time, there were new people for me to love and people to love me.
And I've had a bumper crop of new mothers and fathers
And sisters and brothers
And daughters and sons and grandchildren...
My circle of love has expanded enormously!
Because God honours and blesses the gifts we give –
And multiplies them with abundant generosity!

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I don't know if the Guy with the Donkey had been a follower of Jesus before that day.
I don't know if he decided to take the day off and follow Jesus up to Jerusalem
Just to see how the donkey got on...
I don't know if he followed Jesus on to the temple to see how he fared...
Or to the Upper Room
Or to the Garden of Gethsemane
Or to Pilate's chamber
Or to Golgotha.

I don't know if he hid in the crowd after the death
Trying to remain anonymous in shock and despair.
I don't know if he kept an eye out for other followers
Or if somehow, he managed to get his donkey back
And just... went... home.

But, having been a follower of Jesus myself for a while now,
I would guess that when he got home,
He found himself with more donkeys than he knew what to do with...

Because that's how it is with God.
He gives us what we need and more,
And then asks us to share...
So that we can learn to be a little bit more like God –
Sharing our gifts, sharing our love,
Multiplying the blessings,
Building up the kingdom,
One blessed donkey at a time.
Amen.

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Intercessions

Generous God, giver of donkeys and daughters
Of mothers and fathers and houses and fields
Of friends and colleagues
Of pianos and daily meals
Of blessings and burdens
Of trials and triumphs,

We thank you today for coming into our world and blessing us.

Generous God, sometimes we fall into the trap of thinking
That all we have has come through our own efforts
But you remind us again that all we have comes from you –
That what you have given is sufficient
And yet, what is most essential is our relationship with you.

When all the things in our lives become more precious than your presence,
Lord, have mercy, and forgive us, and help us to change.

We pray today for those around us who feel trapped
By circumstances, by tragedies,
By estrangement from other – or from you.
Lord, we know that whatever the circumstances,
When you are by our side, we can face the future with confidence.
Because you are a generous God,
There is enough for all your children.

Lord God, we also know that often you give us more than we need
So that we can experience your generosity by giving to others as well –
Not just our leftover change or a few tins from the cupboard
But giving ourselves, as you have given yourself to us.

Indeed, Lord God, we remember this week how you have given yourself for us –
How you gave up your very life
So that we might live even more abundantly,
So that we might know that there is nothing in heaven or on earth
That can ultimately overcome your power, your love, your grace.

Be with us, Lord, as we remember.
Be with us, Lord, as we recognise what it is that you need from us –
What gifts we can give that will speak to the world of your resurrection
Time and time and time again
In your infinite generosity and love. Amen!