

## Sermon Archive 219

Sunday 28 October, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Numbers 22: 20-35

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



*This sermon, shorter than usual, was written for Knox's annual service of the blessing of the animals.*

-ooOoo-

On one occasion Jesus took a little child, placed it among the disciples and said "you should be like a little child". As far as we know he never took a donkey, put *it* among them and said "you should be like that". But in the story of Balaam, the donkey is definitely the good character. So here's a little reflection on the error of the human being, the wisdom of the animal, and a possible lesson for those of us who feel called into the role of the perceptive servant.

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Here's some background to the human being. Balaam is a prophet of the living God. He perceives what God is saying, then says it. He tends to end up saying either positive things or negative things - depending on what he discerns God is saying. Now within the broader culture of the cluttered cultural landscape of his place and time, people from outside Balaam's faith don't quite understand the internal processes involved - the discerning of the will of God. All they see is that this man makes pronouncements that sound either like blessings or curses. In the buyers' market for a curse, Balak, king of Moab, decides it would be good to hire Balaam. He's got what appears to be a hostile camp of foreigners assembling on his border, and wants them cursed. As it happens the group of people assembling are the Israelites - the people of Balaam's God.

So Balaam, the central human figure in this story is someone called to serve God, but who is misunderstood by the culture around him as being

an independent agent of blessing and cursing. His power is perceived to be the power of words. His speaking is what makes him valuable to people who don't quite understand where the words are coming from.

Balak sends a delegation to Balaam to ask for a curse. Although Balaam makes the point that he can't just whisk up a curse to order, eventually, after receiving offers of money and fame, he's willing to go along and have a word with Balak. The central human figure in the story is the one who can speak, the one whose words are considered to be valuable, who's meant to perceive deep things, but who seems to be embarking on a journey of compromise.

What we learn of the central human being along the way is that he's not perceiving as he should. A great dangerous angel appears right in front of him, with a huge flashing sword - and he doesn't see it. On the road to compromise, he's losing the capacity to see. What we also learn of the central human being is that when he meets frustrations (in the form of an unusually reluctant donkey) his reaction is one of violence. He hits the animal that frustrates him. He threatens the animal that frustrates him. He abuses the animal that frustrates him - without asking the question "why is this happening?" Violence solves every problem, doesn't it! And when challenged as to why he's done this, he says "If I had a sword in my hand just now, I'd use it". I find it interesting that Balaam talks about swords. Why would he talk about a sword? Is it because he's seen a sword three times just now in the hand of an angel? An angel he **does** see, but is pretending he **doesn't** . . . On the journey into compromising a curse for the sake of fame and money, he's now pretending he doesn't see. I'm not sure about that . . . But for the moment that's probably enough about the central human figure.

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Balaam's donkey is the central animal character in the story. We know that the donkey has been providing the human being with reliable, unspectacular service for years. "Am I not your donkey which you have ridden all your life to this day?" The donkey is the servant. At the start of the story the donkey has no gift of speech. It can't speak, and if it could,

who's going to listen to a donkey when there's a human being on top of it who's famous for his speaking? No, the donkey is a grey, unspeaking servant. The important thing about the donkey, though, is that it isn't refusing to see what's right in front of it. Nor has it lost the capacity to realise that a big frightening angel with a giant flashing sword is something to be avoided. This is dangerous. So it changes course, it deviates off into a field. When forced back onto the road, in its rider's keenness to work on a curse, it deviates again. When forced a third time into something it knows is dangerous, it lies down completely. "Down tools, you workers. Sit in your protesters, singing, hee-hawing 'We shall not be moved!'"

Receiving another visitation of violence for its protest, the animal suddenly develops a miraculous capacity. It suddenly is able to speak. Its first deed of speech is to put to the articulate man of powerful words a simple question. "Why are you doing this?"

The animal character becomes more impressive than the human character. It saves the day. The hitherto inarticulate servant, who is true with what it sees, and what it wants to avoid, provides the turning point, and brings the powerful one to his knees, with a question: why are you doing this?

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People and animals of Knox, I think it unlikely that any of us will end up in conversation with a talking donkey. Nor do I intend to give much thought this morning to how the animals speak to us (although maybe a seagull with a beer ring around its neck, or a turtle with a straw up its nose, or a whale pod beached in confusion does "speak" to us about what we're doing). No, this morning I make the point of Balaam's donkey - that the character in the story who makes the difference is the character who learns to speak of what is obvious and dangerous before us, as we go off to peddle our curses for the rich, anxious and powerful. It is the grey servant, learning how to speak, you saves us from serving the wrong. Perhaps it is the grey and plodding victims of the stick who

win the right to change the story.

Although it is true that Jesus never said to his disciples “be like a donkey”, here there is food for thought. So that was a little reflection on the error of the human being, the wisdom of the animal, and a possible lesson for those of us who feel called into the role of the perceptive servant.

Amen.

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