

Sunday March 31, 2013

How about the Easter donkey?

By Jim Taylor

I wonder what the donkey thought of the Resurrection?

That's an idle speculation, of course, because there is no mention of a donkey in the biblical accounts of Jesus' resurrection. But then, there's no mention of Easter bunnies and chocolate eggs either.

The donkey at least has a valid reason for being considered. Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem earlier that week.

It was Passover Week in Jerusalem. Judaism required every faithful Jewish male to come to Jerusalem for the central celebration of the Jewish people – their escape from slavery in Egypt.

Normally, Jerusalem had a population of about 25,000. For Passover, it would swell to 150,000. Patriotism flared. Zealots ranted against the Roman occupation.

And the Romans, naturally, invoked a military “surge” – like G.W. Bush – by bringing in troops to quell any possible disturbances.

Pontius Pilate would have had available about 3,000 foot-soldiers. They would have marched from their headquarters on the Mediterranean coast to this cold, windy city perched on the highest ridge above the rift valley of the Jordan River.

Their arrival would resemble the displays of military might organized by Stalin in Red Square in Moscow. But instead of tanks and missiles, they had men. Wave after wave of them – hardened, ruthless, fully armed -- a display of raw power to intimidate any potential rebels.

They came through a western gate. At roughly the same time, the Bible says, a much smaller procession came in through an eastern gate. In the centre of it, a man on a donkey.

The central character

The first time I saw the famed Passion Play at Oberammergau, in the Bavarian Alps, what seemed like the entire population of the village flooded onto the stage for that opening scene. In that mass of people, I couldn't find Jesus.

I don't know what I expected. Perhaps I thought he should stand taller than anyone else. Or glow. Or wear a red cape and leap over tall buildings with a single bound...

I finally found him. By finding the donkey.

The donkey is actually the key character in that procession. When the first gospel writer wanted to show that Jesus came in peace, not as a Roman warlord riding in an armoured Humvee, he scrolled back into the writings of Jewish prophets. He found Zechariah, one of the least of those prophets, who said, “Behold, your king comes to you... humble and riding on a donkey.”

I've always had a soft spot for donkeys. All over the world, they stagger along under enormous loads. Without complaining. Or demanding raises. Or seeking nominations to a Donkey Hall of Fame. They simply do what they have to do.

Sometimes I look into a donkey's big soft eyes, and I see myself.

Still plodding along

But after the Procession of the Palms, the donkey disappears. And why, you might wonder, would the Easter event mean anything to a donkey anyway?

Only because the people who wrote the biblical texts shared a common conviction that anything related to their God had cosmic significance.

So when Adam and Eve disobeyed God's command, their "fall" from grace affected not just those two, but all humans. And, in some views, all of creation.

Conversely, with Jesus resurrection, everything was restored to a right relationship with God. That's why Paul's letters repeatedly refer to believers as a "new creation" in Christ.

How would that affect a donkey?

Well, it probably didn't. It probably just kept plodding along. Same as usual. Like most of Jerusalem.

The crucifixion offers lurid accounts of earthquakes, temple curtains tearing in two, and skies darkening. They strike me as fanciful imaginings, after the fact. After all, for such a tragic event, something momentous must have happened. Mustn't it?

But you'll notice that accounts of the resurrection itself contain no supernatural occurrences at all. No thunderbolts. No earthquakes. No volcanoes showering fire.

Just an empty tomb.

And the few people who saw it didn't know what to make of it. The gospel stories agree that the first witnesses – in every version, women, who were not considered credible witnesses in Jewish law – fled in fear and/or confusion.

Different perspectives

So I'm not surprised if the donkey wouldn't sense that anything significant had happened. Not even Jesus' closest companions did. It was only later, in hindsight, that they put together those first stirrings of awareness that life was now different, in ways that they couldn't quite define.

The resurrection symbolized, I suggest, an intersection, a crossing (pun intended), of two contradictory visions of life.

One vision – entropy – asserts that everything is winding down. Energy dissipates. Enthusiasms grow cold. We die and disappear...

The other – evolution – suggests that as anything fades out, something new emerges. Something more complex. More diverse. Better adapted to the world it exists in.

Of course, Jesus' disciples, male or female, could not have used those words to describe their experience, because they didn't have them yet.

And neither did the donkey. But I'd like to think it too might have sensed that something had changed. Even if it didn't know what.

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YOUR TURN

I was surprised at the reactions to last week's column, suggesting that the widespread condemnation of the Roman Catholic Church might be both prejudiced and inaccurate. Over the week, I've had people telephone me to express thanks, stop me in parking lots, and of course, write. Here's a sampling of letters.

Chris Duxbury, in Australia, didn't buy all of my apologia: "To me there is something extra horrible about people being abused by those who are supposed to be acting in the name of God."

Florence Dreidger countered, "We have a huge problem in our society because we do not know how to deal with sexuality in a healthy manner, in church or in the community generally. Why do we tar and feather the Pope [or the Church], but let TV, the film industry and many other venues go on with abuse of people through extremely harmful sexual exploitation and keep buying and encouraging it? And those who attempt to teach, counsel, preach about this God-given part of humanity to help us all, are told they are not to, and are often chastised by society, their church, their community.

"While I too don't condone abuse in the church and how they have not been able to prevent it or deal with it in a more open manner, why do we let the rest of us continue to see ourselves lily pure while we point the finger at others? And why do we see this abuse unforgivable, and in many cases never accept a person who has taken and is taking responsibility for his/her failures...?"

Steve Roney wrote, "I appreciate your defending the Catholic Church, but I don't think you go far enough.

"I think recent revelations demonstrate that the Catholic Church in fact has shown a significantly lesser tendency to lie about these things than, for example, the Boy Scouts, the public schools, or Penn State University, less than the average institution, in other words.

Secondly, there is an alternate, obvious, explanation for why Catholic bishops might have kept quiet about sex offenders, which needs in fairness to be mentioned -- the Christian duty of forgiveness. There is no reason to presume the motive of institutional self-protection; it may have been involved; it may not. Note too that, up until about the 90s, common opinion was that sex offenders were capable of going and sinning no more. And that view is probably more correct than the current hysteria."

Pat Brush cut to the heart of the church controversy. She noted the Guardian's comment that "'victims in the general population are overwhelmingly female, the pattern among American Catholic priests was quite different. Four out of five of their victims were male."

Pat wrote, "And there we have why the Roman Catholic Church is dogged by this controversy. Individually, we may be horrified by the thought of sexual abuse of girl children, but societal attitudes and media reporting indicate some sort of gruesome normality to this. [But] some Roman Catholic priests have dared to interfere with boys, precious boys, inherently superior boys, just by the fact of having been born male. That interference is seen by many as the ultimate insult to a man, the taking of the feminine position. Combine that with the administrative non-handling of offenders and this becomes a story that will not die."

Isobel Gibson offered her usual terse and pointed commentary: "I think that we try to justify giving power to some folks -- first by thinking of them as perfect, then by requiring them to be perfect. Any sign that they (police, clergy, doctors, politicians, military, teachers -- you name it) might be just, you know, people, seems like a betrayal of our trust in them... Somehow, the notion that most do a good job (often under difficult circumstances) even though they aren't perfect and are never going to be perfect, is too hard for us to hold onto.

"That seems odd when we apply it to ourselves - I know I'm not perfect but figure I do a pretty good job anyway. I wonder why we have trouble applying it to others?"

John Willems had his own view about the mass media's hypocrisies: "Can we say profit? Let's paint the kettle black. I wonder what percentage of the media have left (or forced out) their profession because you can only call out the sins of others while hiding your own sins only so long."

Jim Henderschedt: "I am praying that Pope Francis will live up to his namesake and return compassion to the office of church leadership."

It seems he's doing that. Pope Francis is apparently following his tradition of doing things for himself. Not only is he living in a simple apartment at the Vatican, instead of in the papal palace, but David Rattray reported that he had called a newspaper kiosk in Buenos Aires personally to cancel a subscription there.

Art Gans, Laurna Tallman, Rachel Pritchard, John Cameron, and Victoria Oppertshauser also wrote. I appreciated their insights, even if I haven't included the letters here.

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For other sources worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
