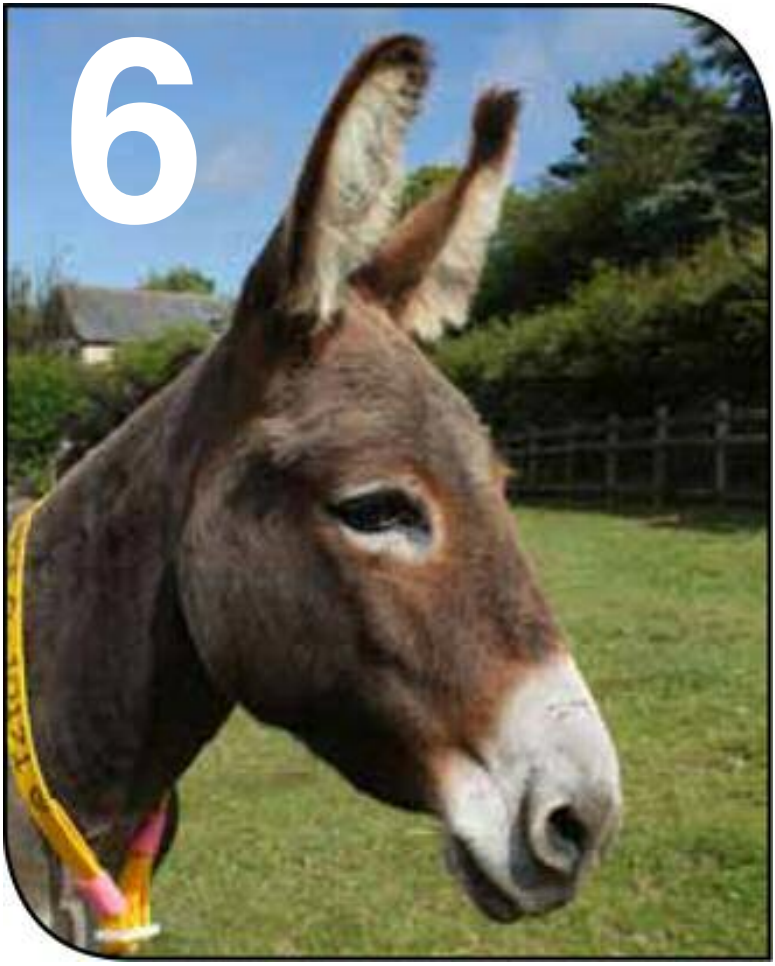

As I write this study our donkeys are gently grazing the pasture which the God of Life so generously provided through lush spring rain and sunshine. These gentle creatures are the delight of the many children and adults who enjoy riding them - or maybe a ride in the donkey cart.

"The God of Life"

Ruler of Life

As I write this study our donkeys are gently grazing the pasture which the God of Life so generously provided through lush spring rain and sunshine. These gentle creatures are the delight of the many children and adults who enjoy riding them - or maybe a ride in the donkey cart.

The donkeys are a guaranteed attraction for everyone. My wife, with friends Arthur and Jeanne, train and oversee the donkeys in their ministry in church and community activities. An attractive brochure is distributed to each participant and explains the significance of donkeys in the story of Jesus Christ and, more importantly, what Jesus means for life: present and eternal. The Anglican Church Donkey Ministry connects people with the God of Life and his way or rule of life.

Donkeys are rightly referred to as "the dogs of the equine world" due to their affectionate nature and desire to be with people. I recall working out in a paddock and often receiving a nudge on my shoulder and there the donkeys would be gathered around me, sharing in the activity and checking out my progress!

Our first donkey, Bonny, who features prominently in one evangelistic brochure, brought much warmth and joy to our household over many years.

The following vignettes from her ministry illustrate some of the endearing qualities of the animal that Jesus chose to ride on his "triumphal entry' into Jerusalem: kindness, gentleness, trust. Donkeys have a special affinity with children. Bonny went to a school for severely handicapped children. In a hall half full of wheelchairs and very excited, arm-waving children, she went up to each wheelchair and put her head in the child's lap.

Jesus said, "Let the children come to me, and don't try to stop them!" (Matthew 19:14)

On another occasion, Bonny was asked to walk down the aisle through green and yellow streamers at a Palm Sunday service in a large church. She looked at her handler as if to say, "You have to be kidding," then calmly, gently walked forward, confidently breaking the streamers as she went.

From then on Jesus began telling his disciples what would happen to him. He said, "I must go to Jerusalem. There the nation's leaders, the chief priests and the teachers of the Law of Moses will make me suffer terribly. I will be killed but three days later I will rise to life." (Matthew 16:21)

Donkeys are special animals. Oh! And did I mention that most donkeys have a cross on the fur on their back? The cross was to be the final destination of the donkey's Rider on his "triumphal entry".

The cross is the incomprehensibility, the ‘scandal’ of this hailed entry into Jerusalem. How can it be that that the crowd’s cry of “Hosanna!’ turns to “Crucify him!”?

Our Palm Sunday reflection is an extraordinary ‘high’ of public adulation and anticipation. For us, on the other side of the resurrection and ascension, the adulation and anticipation of Christ’s rule not only remains - but is stronger than ever. The Ruler of Life has conquered the grave and at this very moment is interceding for us at the right hand of God. Praise the Lord!

The challenge for the followers of the donkey Rider is to live fully under his rule of life and to live his rule, his way of life. The challenge is to show by our lives, that as Paul said, “the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus”.

Welcome

Opening Prayer

Courageous and humble Ruler of life,
open our eyes to see you,
our ears to hear you,
our hands and feet to serve you.
Guide our time together:
may we learn of your ways
of courage and humility,
of peace and grace.
May your Holy Spirit
guide, guard and bless
our sharing community. Amen.

Bible Readings

John 12:12-16
Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem
12 The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. 13 So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting,
"Hosanna!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!"
14 Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written:
15 "Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.
Look, your king is coming sitting on a donkey's colt!"
16 His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.

Philippians 2:5-11
5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
6 who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
7 but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
8 he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.
9 Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
10 so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Imagine for a time that you are in the crowd shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel!" Can you capture the excitement and feel the tingle running up and down your spine? What hopes and dreams are fuelling your excitement?

The palm branches being waved are signs normally used by the Romans to show their military might and conquests. Yet here you are with the crowd waving them to an Israelite! Your heart thumps with joyous anticipation: surely this man, this miracle worker, is the long awaited liberator who will lead the conquered Israelites to overthrow the detested Romans. The new ruler has come to Jerusalem. Our Liberator, our Messiah! Freedom is ours!

You wonder, what will happen next? Will Jesus ride directly to the headquarters of the Roman rulers? Will he dismount and give a rousing speech, call us to take up swords and spears, and lead the surging crowd into the Roman Governor's rooms? Will freedom from the Roman overlords finally be won?

But wait! Why has this Liberator come riding on a donkey? The donkey is the animal of domestic life, of humble work, of perseverance and peace. Liberators come astride horses! Horses are built for battle, not donkeys. What is really going on here?

I trust that the above 'imagining' has helped you to enter into this extraordinary event.

After Jesus' entry into the city of Jerusalem, do you recall where he actually went and what he did there? (Matthew 21:12-17)

What then does Jesus' entry to Jerusalem signify? What is the defining nature of the rule which he seeks to establish?

In what ways are we like the disciples of Jesus who "did not understand these things at first"?

On occasions have you struggled to understand God's work and ways?

How have you grown in your understanding? Take time to reflect quietly and then share with one another.

*Pastoral Implications of life under the authority of the Ruler of Life

Read Philippians 2:5-8

What challenging insights Paul brings in urging greater maturity in the Christian community at Philippi! Paul appeals to the example of Jesus Christ "who, though he was in the form of God, . . . humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross." (Phil. 2:6,8) Can you recall circumstances when this challenge to humble obedience has influenced your life or ministry?

In what circumstances might you apply this same teaching in your ministry?

It is vital to appreciate that this way, or rule, of life commended by Paul is based on the life of Christ. What other ways or rules of life come from the example of Jesus? Share ideas. In what ways could these ideas be put into practice?

Read Philippians 2:9-11

What does this passage tell us about the person of Jesus Christ? And about the nature of Jesus' rule and the people ruled? How do you imagine this to be?

In what ways do images such as Ezekiel 1:1,4-2:2 or Revelation 7:9,10 or Revelation 21 assist you to image the Ruler of Life - and life under his eternal rule?

Closing Prayer

Share a time of prayer, and close by praying together:

Include Psalm 118: 1, 2, 19-29 'A Song of Victory' in your closing prayers.

1 O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his steadfast love endures forever!
2 Let Israel say,
"His steadfast love endures forever."

19 Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the LORD.
20 This is the gate of the LORD;
the righteous shall enter through it.
21 I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.
22 The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.
23 This is the LORD's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.
24 This is the day that the LORD has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.
25 Save us, we beseech you, O LORD!
O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!
26 Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.
We bless you from the house of the LORD.
27 The LORD is God,
and he has given us light.
Bind the festal procession with branches,
up to the horns of the altar.
28 You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God, I will extol you.
29 O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.

WORTH THINKING ABOUT!

Observe the importance of prophecy fulfilled by Jesus in his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. See Zechariah 9:9 and note Jesus' words concerning the Law and the Prophets in Matthew 5:17. The Psalms echo through the Gospel accounts: from Psalm 118:26 in John 12:15; Jesus' words on the cross echo Psalm 22:1a and his treatment on the cross through Psalm 22. See also the links from the Servant's humiliation and vindication in Isaiah 50:5-9a to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

This raises the question, in thinking about my own discipleship, as to whether or not I give sufficient attention to the Old Testament. Take time to reflect on your own practice and in the group share ideas for Old Testament enrichment.

Going Further

Please bear with me while I outline some very serious thinking over more than two decades about the nature of the rule or way of life of a community. I believe that the person who establishes a rule of life is the model or exemplar of that rule or way of life. A community is shaped by its founder's way of life.

In considering Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, I am reminded that in a broad sense he saw himself as a messenger of God who was rejected by the religious leaders of his community.

Nearly six centuries later another man who also saw himself as a messenger of God was also rejected by the religious leaders of his community.

In each case the religious leaders of their time and place set out to kill them. How did these two religious men, each of them rejected by their religious leaders, respond to the threat of death?

In the first case, the rejected messenger mounted a donkey, entered the holy city of Jerusalem, submitted to the authorities, was tried, sentenced and executed on a cross. His way was the way of non-violence. Indeed, when one of his followers took up the sword to defend him, he ordered the sword be sheathed and he healed a wounded opponent. He established a community who spoke of his resurrection and of forgiveness and reconciliation with God and neighbour.

In the latter case, the rejected messenger, Mohammad, mounted a horse, fled the holy city of Mecca, took up the sword, raised up an army and went to war. His way was the way of violence. Indeed, he ordered the killing of his enemies and took their possessions. He established a military, political and economic sovereign state.

My reflection: The rule is set by the ruler. The character of the ruler is the exemplar of the ruled.

Our challenge is to follow ever more closely the rule of the true Ruler of Life, the One who said, "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6)

Jesus' rule is the way of humility, of peace-making. The Prince of Peace entered Jerusalem that Palm Sunday on a donkey, the humblest of animals. Jesus chose the way of sacrifice, of turning towards the God of Life and God's rule of life.

Jesus sets us the example to follow when at death's door in the Garden of Gethsemane he affirms, "Father, . . . not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42)

Refreshments