

The Sound of God

Sermon for Palm Sunday, April 5 2009

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"Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your King is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey"--

Matthew 21, 5

A little child once asked her mother a question of profound theological significance. "Mommy", she said, "What does God sound like?"

What does God sound like? This is the kind of question that a child would ask – the kind that leaves you speechless as you try to figure out how to respond. It is not one that we would expect to be asked by an adult. But if we think about it, I am sure that we have some feelings about the answer.

For instance, in spite of the growing influence of feminist thinking in our culture and in our theology, I would imagine that most people would expect to hear God speak with the voice of a man rather than of a woman, and with the voice of an adult rather than that of a child.

In the cultural history of mythology and religion, God often sounded unlike any human voice at all. The Creator was heard in the rolling thunder, the crashing eruption of a volcano, the roar of a tempest – or in the music of the spheres. In our day, I suppose that people might expect God to sound like the roar of a mighty rocket – or, at the very least, like the thunderous majesty of a great cathedral organ.

What *does* God sound like?

According to the story of Palm Sunday, God does not sound like any of those things which might come immediately to mind. If we could have screened out the many other noises of that march into Jerusalem– the shouts of the crowd, the cries of the camels and the bleating of goats in the market-place, the clatter of Roman arms and the thud of marching feet – we would have heard beneath them all the clip clop, clip clop of a donkey's hooves.

The simple noise of the lowliest beast of burden, hardly heard at all amid the louder, more strident noises of life, bearing upon its back the One whom Christians believe to have been the Son of God. The roar of thunder, the crash of a volcano, the mightiest sounds that we can conceive of– all are as nothing before the steady, almost silent journey of Jesus from his birth in a manger to his death on a cross.

In the story of Palm Sunday, we experience an eternal message. God comes to the human race in simple ways– ways that are rejected by those who seek the outer pomp and glory of life. To be sure, the majesty of the Creator can be experienced in ocean and thunder, in storm and tempest, in the far reaches of the universe and the mystery of subatomic particles. Yet the presence of God in the

human heart comes quietly, seated upon the donkey of our very humanness, unhurriedly walking the road of life with determination and great compassion.

There is in our day a change in the role of the Church. For centuries the church of God has sounded more like the crashing of armies than the humble, steady plodding of a donkey's hooves. Glorifying in the powerful role that religion played in human culture, its leaders have more often resembled kings and potentates than the tattered, bewildered group that followed the donkey into the Holy City with the crowd that sang Hosannah and spread palm branches in the road.

But in our day, the traditional church has been losing its power truly to impact the culture. It no longer carries influence on world affairs anywhere near that of nation states or multinational corporations. Its message of faith in God and love as the definer of human affairs has been lost in the sounds of a materialistic world.

But there are still many who come quietly, seeking to catch for a moment the sound of those hooves, to see the courageous, humble figure of Jesus; perhaps to catch his eye for a moment and to receive the assurance that we do, after all, still possess our souls.

It is to these that Palm Sunday brings the message of healing. For the march to Jerusalem still continues, and the Christ may still be encountered along the way. I would like to suggest two ways of listening for the sound of the donkey's hooves.

First, there is the inner way. In the quiet that lies at the center of the storm of modern life, may we listen to our own souls and bodies. The donkey has been in the past a symbol of our body, the organic unity of our earthly form. St. Francis refers to his body as "Brother Ass", the collection the basic instinctual realities which fill our life from childhood on. It is the matrix within which our soul grows and develops.

All of us have somewhere hidden within the childlike qualities of openness, simple joy and spontaneous emotional response. We learn to repress them and stifle them to our own loss. When Christ spoken of becoming as little children, I am sure that he had these qualities in mind. All too often they are lost in the demands of modern life. We travel in fast cars or jet planes, and have no time the plodding simplicity of instinctual life, of childlike wonder.

Yet if we become still and truly listen to ourselves totally in all of our humanity, we may hear the simple sound of the donkey carrying the Creator of the universe into our lives. Until we allow him to come to us in this way, in divine simplicity, Palm Sunday is only a story and Easter a possibility.

But if we hear those donkey hooves in this first way, within ourselves, we can begin to hear them in a second way— in the outer world. For Christ rides on in the small as well as in the great events of history. His march to Jerusalem is reflected in the eyes of the poor, powerless and weak— in the oppressed and neglected — and in the silent cries of nature and of the earth itself, torn and threatened by the insensitivity of the human race.

In our day, as then, the outer noise is great and the crowds are con-fusing. There are rabble rousers and fanatics who work among the people, stirring them to suicidal fury. And there are the powerful, self righteous citizens of the temple and of the palace, frightened and threatened by the Hosannas, who would put the Savior to death again rather than have old ways changed and privileges threatened.

Violence flares from both extremes– from violent radicals and from marching armies– yet through the midst of it all rides the Christ, on his way to Calvary, bearing with him the gift of life.

As we read our newspapers, watch our television and walk the streets, we need to be alert. For we may catch a glimpse of the donkey with the silent figure on its back, and hear the sound of the hooves beneath the confusion and the noise.

But the tumult is so loud that we will not hear unless we listen carefully, and with our whole being. If we have not heard him in our souls, it is doubtful that we will hear him in the streets. But the humble, eternal Christ is here– as he has always been. We can hear him and we can know him, if we seek honestly and with all our hearts.

What does God sound like?