The Prayer of the Donkey

December 3rd, 2017

Advent 1

Advent is a time when we long for the coming of Jesus. And as we look forward to the coming of Jesus, we remember how Jesus was born into the poverty, danger, risk, and darkness of the earth, yet born of immeasurable light to reveal light and the riches of heaven to those who yearn for them. One of the things I love about our faith is the long history of iconography. I love the burning colours, the simplicity of forms, the radiance of the faces, the mystery of the symbolism. I love Andrei Rublev, El Greco, and Fra Angelico. Their paintings are charged with a divine awareness, an openness to the transcendent radiance of God. In Christian iconography, the nativity often features a cave or a barn, for as the Gospel of Luke says, "And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7). Mangers are used to feed animals. While the Son of God came to save the people of the world, and while his very name Jesus means "God saves," this salvation has cosmic implications. It is fitting that the birthplace of Jesus would involve the non-human creatures God lovingly created. As the apostle Paul says, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved" (Romans 8:18-24). In this hope we are saved. There is much we can learn from creation to know the Creator (Romans 1). Imagine what sort of animals might have been there when Jesus was born. A great many long distance travellers were returning to their hometowns to be taxed—there must have been donkeys and camels for such journeys. And there were clearly locals who kept sheep and goats—some of the shepherds entrusted with the flocks met the angels who announced the divine birth. There were likely other work animals, too: horses and oxen, for those who could afford them, to help plow and pull heavy loads. This year, I want to build a word painting or word icon, an icon of the nativity built step by step, one Sunday of Advent at a time, one animal at a time, until we can fully immerse ourselves in the moment of moments, the moment when the Word was made flesh and began to dwell among us—Emmanuel, God with us.

To this end, I have sought the wisdom of Carmen Bernos de Gasztold, a poor French woman who lived through very difficult times and wrote beautiful poems about animals, most notably *Prayers from the Ark* and *The Creatures' Choir* (Tr. Rummer Godden. New York: Penguin, 1977). She was born in Arcachon in the province of Bordeaux. She was educated by the Sisters of St. Joseph, then by the College Sainte Marie at Neuilly near Paris. At the young age of sixteen, Carmen lost her father and had to start earning her living. She taught children. For seven years, she worked at an artificial silk factory. The war years were difficult—there was a lack of fuel and food, the terrors of the German occupation, and the difficulty of her work at the laboratory. During this time of hardship, she write her first poem. It was like an epiphany, and many more poems would come over the years. After the war, Carmen worked as a governess and then as a kindergarten teacher, but eventually suffered a physical and mental breakdown.

Our first animal is the donkey. It is not unreasonable to imagine that there was a donkey in the stables or barn where Mary, Joseph and the little Jesus spent the night. It was very likely that Mary, great with child, rode a donkey down to Bethlehem, for the way was 100 miles long, rocky, dusty and hard. The donkey is an unlikely symbol of hope, perhaps, but no donkey could live and endure what donkeys endure without some sort of animalistic hope. Gasztold has a "Prayer of the Donkey", which goes like this:

God, who made me

to trudge along the road

always,

to carry heavy loads

always,

and to be beaten

always!

Give me great courage and gentleness.

One day let somebody understand me—

that I may no longer weep

because I can never say what I mean

and they make fun of me.

Let me find a juicy thistle—

and make them give me time to pick it.

And, Lord, one day, let me find again

my little brother of the Christmas crib. Amen. (29).

The donkey hopes for a time when he will no longer be overburdened and beaten, when he will have time to just eat some thistles without being rushed. This is probably how real donkeys feel. This is part of the creation groaning for redemption. It is also how a great many humans, treated like beasts, feel. I imagine these are not just the prayers that Carmen imagines the animals pray, but the prayers of Carmen Gasztold herself as she worked through hardship after hardship, loss after loss, and yet hoped for a time of quiet, a time to just enjoy something and feel at peace.

In our reading today the apostle Paul begins his letter with a benediction, writing: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:3-9). Paul says that through the coming of Jesus, we have been made rich. It is interesting that he says "in speech and knowledge of every kind." When Christ comes into our hearts, we come into the kingdom of heaven. And just as the countries of history and today have their own languages, the kingdom of heaven has its own rich language, a language that gives us meaning and expression for the deep things of our newfound joy in God. Language is not merely about expression, however. We do not merely learn a language in order to speak about what we already know. A great deal of our language learning involves learning about new things, things we did not know before. When I was a child, I learned the word donkey by seeing a picture of a donkey in a book. Learning the word meant seeing an image of the donkey in order to identify what I was looking at. Then one day, my mother took me to a farm, and I got to ride on one. It was a wonderful day—one of the best experiences of my life. Donkeys are amazing creatures. I learned the word first, and then the experience came. Through language acquisition, our world grows larger and deeper; it gains texture and colour. It becomes an event. The apostle speaks of "knowledge of every kind." Our spiritual knowledge in Jesus also gives us hope—it gives us wisdom and tools to solve everyday problems, to meet challenges, to overcome obstacles, and better—to enjoy the journey of living and grow closer to God.

The donkey in our poem is searching for an interruption in his routine, a chance to chew a thistle or find his long-lost brother, the baby Jesus. Very simple, beautiful things to desire. The Incarnation is an interruption of the world's fallenness, and thus a return to innocence. It is a redemptive break-in. The first coming of Jesus was no less confounding and irritating than the second coming to those who resist grace. In the days before Jesus was born, the wealthy and powerful were not looking for a saviour. They were not expecting a king to right all wrongs. They had no need of such a person. They feared such an agent of confusion and contradiction. They were satisfied with how things were going. Herod did not want to worship the newborn king—he wanted to eliminate him (Matthew 2:1-18). We often speak of contentment as a virtue, and there is a certain kind of grateful contentment without which we cannot experience the kingdom of heaven. Nevertheless, there is an evil kind of content—this is the content of Herod, who is happy to be king, happy to murder children to maintain his order, happy to obstruct the work of God to maintain his cult of personality and idolatry. In a less extreme way, we too can be little Herods. There is the vicious self-satisfaction in enjoying power, privilege and comfort, in having done things right, in having the right opinions, in being better than others. For those content in such a way, Jesus brings disquiet. There is also a divine discontent. It is the hopeful discontent of those who are not satisfied with fallenness, sin, sorrow, or brokenness, the discontent of those who invent new ways to help people, of those who discover new scientific knowledge, of those who invent better ways to paint fine works of art, of those who make music new and fresh and radiant, of those who yearn for Christ more and more. It is the divine discontent of the donkey, who imagines and prays for a world where there is no more beating, no more rushing, no more mockery. Every child that has ever been bullied in school dreams of this. Every quiet social pariah who just cannot seem to make the cut in society dreams of this. The invisible labourers, the ones called idiots, the backwards, the slow, the fearful, the lost, the poor, the helpless, the ones who fall through the cracks, the overworked people like Carmen Gasztold. They pray this prayer. They search for the one who said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." They search for the one who said, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30). They welcome the coming of Christ into the world and into their hearts. They will welcome the coming of Christ again. This is the reclamation of time that the donkey hopes for. And hope says that it is near.

Because of the Incarnation, Jesus is always near, at the very gates, coming quickly to us. When Martha confessed her faith to Jesus, she spoke of Jesus not just as the one who had come but the one who is coming: "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world" (John 11:27). For Martha, it is not just a hope set on the past or future, it is a hope in the present that Christ is always coming, always coming to turn death into life, beatings into healings, harshness into kindness, discontent into contentment. And similarly, Carmen's donkey expresses this same desire for the coming Jesus: "And, Lord, one day, let me find again my little brother of the Christmas crib. Amen."

In our bulletin, we have a nativity icon by Theophanes the Cretan. I love this icon because the animals play an important theological and pedagogical role. The ass and the ox, the horses and sheep—they are all there telling the story of the Incarnation. Joel J. Miller comments: "It’s important to note that icons do not capture historical moments like photos; they present theological truths like sermons. So while, the magi did not come at the birth of Christ but later, they here enter the frame from the left with their gifts. Sometimes they are on foot, other times on horseback, indicating their long journey to worship the king. The same point might apply to the ox and donkey. There’s no record in the gospel of what livestock was present at the Lord’s birth, but Isaiah 1.3 says, 'The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master’s crib. . . .' Their presence overlooking the manger is a means by which rebellious Israel is contrasted with the faithful Christ" (http://www.patheos.com/blogs/joeljmiller/2012/12/icons-of-the-nativity/#jo0bU6creO1HFo2S.99). The donkey knows its Saviour. And we, too, hopefully, know and welcome our Saviour, gathering around the manger to welcome the Christ who comes into the world. The donkey is also strong and patient, even when the work is hard, and such strength is also hope. Jesus "will also strengthen you to the end," as Paul says, to be blameless, to be in fellowship with God, to be ready for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. As the apostle says, "God is faithful"! Jesus is coming into the world. May we open our hearts to Him. Lord, come quickly! Amen.