

## Who is that on the donkey?

*A Palm Sunday sermon*

Matthew 21:1-11

Reading's one of my favourite pastimes. Some books, however, don't ring bells with me. In that category are motivational books by "eminent gurus" who pre-package life and export it on-line, through DVDs and in printed form. Having said that, from time to time I find some interesting observations, even in those books.

I came across this from an American motivational speaker. It had been sent to him in the form of an email and was entitled,

### **"Living Life backwards."**

*I want to live my next life backwards. Here's why.*

*You start out dead and get that out of the way*

*Then you wake up in an old age home feeling better every day*

*Until you are kicked out for being too healthy*

*You enjoy your retirement and collect your pension*

*Then you start work where you get a gold watch on your first day*

*You work for forty years until you are too young to work.*

*You get ready for high school, party a lot and live it up*

*Then you become a kid. You play and have no responsibilities.*

*Then you become a baby and have people catering to your every need.*

*You spend your last nine months floating peacefully and luxuriously in spa like conditions-central heating, room service on tap and then*

*You finish off as a twinkle in someone's eye.*

It's ridiculous of course until you see that behind the tongue in cheek humour lies a profound truth, The Christian Gospel announces that in Jesus and His Kingdom life is indeed lived back to front. It's ridiculous to think of Prince William and Kate riding to Westminster Abbey on donkeys. Royals don't ride on donkeys.

But here on Palm Sunday the King is on a donkey,

Think about it for a moment

### **The birth of the King is back to front.**

Jesus, as GK Chesterton said, was not born on the right side of the tracks but "in a foul stable where beasts feed and roam," conceived by a single mother whose fiancée wondered if he should give her a "Dear Mary" letter... finally forced to flee from pillar to post with his parents and stay away until the ruling party had changed. The birth of the one

born to be King was as St Paul noted in his letter to the Philippians, a topsy-turvy birth all back to front.

"Though rich yet for us he came poor and died... not just a premature death but the death of a common criminal

### **The life and ministry of Jesus is all back to front.**

Here's futurologist, Tom Sine's verdict on Christ's ministry

"Jesus made it clear that his empire would be unlike any empire the world had seen. It came on a donkey's back. Its imperial council was composed of a handful of unemployed fishermen, a couple of Inland Revenue agents, a prostitute and some hangers on. Jesus demonstrated how to wield his imperial power by washing feet, telling stories, and playing with kids.

Jesus Empire is based on the absurd values that the last should be first, losers are winners and the most influential should clean the toilets.

Members of the empire are instructed to love their enemies, forgive their friends, always give twice as much as people ask of them and never pursue power and position. Jesus insisted that those who are part of his empire shouldn't worry about finances, but simply trust God. The resources to run his empire were basins, towels and left over lunches.

This empire also developed a reputation for constantly partying-almost always with the wrong people.

Seriously, is this the way to run an empire, Imagine what would happen if you ran a political, economic or religious institution with these bizarre values? Clearly it wouldn't have much of a future. These values might even get the leader assassinated."

JB Phillips, whose translation of the NT in the 1950s proved highly popular and extremely readable, picks up the same theme in his book, "When God became man." The normal beatitudes by which people live life, he writes, are these:

*Happy are the hard-boiled for they never let life hurt them*

*Happy are they who complain for they get their own way in the end*

*Happy are the blasé for they never worry over their sins*

*Happy are the slave drivers for they get results*

*Happy are the knowledgeable for they know their way around*

*Happy are the trouble makers for they make people take notice of them.*

That's the complete opposite of the back to front Beatitudes of Jesus and His Kingdom as Matthew records them, as indeed is the whole of what we call "The Sermon on the Mount" in Matthew 5-7. Turn the other

cheek, go two miles rather than one, give to those who ask you, forgive first even when you are the wronged party, go to bat for peace, for justice, for gentleness, for mercy... All that's anything but normal. Its life lived back to front.

What's more...

### **His attitude to life and death is topsy-turvy.**

One memorable parable features a man pulling down his barns and building greater. Highly successful said the society pages. A mover and a shaker. No, said Jesus, The man's a fool. He thinks he's successfully living life but it's a fool's way of living. That man, Jesus implied, turned his back on the light, and lived facing the darkness. But my Kingdom's the other way round.

Paul knew that and in an interesting word picture in his letter to the Romans he reverses the way we think about life and death. Most of us, despite what we say we believe, live and act as though this life is the daylight and when we die we go out into the dark.

But Paul reverses that perception. This life, he says, is the dark, the obscure, and the difficult to understand time. Death is the light, Writing to his readers Paul says:

"The darkness is past the daylight is at hand."

Death is leaving the darkness behind us and living with our faces to the light.

Followers of Jesus live life back to front, walking each day with their backs to the dark and their faces to the light

Do I live life like that? The short answer is No!

Do you live life like that? Again if we are decidedly honest the answer is probably No!

Yet the Topsy-Turvy, back to front, donkey-riding King, doesn't go away.

Francis Thompson, celebrated English mystical poet, was a young and gifted student studying for the priesthood and then medicine. But laziness and a dissipated life of drug addiction nearly destroyed him. His love of poetry the only decent thing he had left. At his wits' end on the banks of the Thames he was rescued for posterity by two famous English

publishers Wilfred and Alice Meynell and brought back to a life of wholeness where his literary gifts blossomed. He realised he had spent his early years living life facing the wrong way but that he had been pursued by Jesus Christ whom he describes as "The Hound of Heaven."

In his poem by that name he writes:

*I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;*

*I fled Him, down the arches of the years;*

*I hid from Him,..From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.*

*But with unhurrying chase,*

*And unperturbed pace,*

*Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,*

*They beat — and a Voice beat*

*More instant than the Feet—*

**A voice beat...** Each time he thought what he was doing was living he heard the Hound of Heaven's voice beat calling him to turn and walk toward the light.

Each time I cast a slur on someone because of his or her status, his or her race, his or her sexual orientation, his or her religious beliefs or lack of them I hear the voice beat of Jesus

You are facing the wrong way. You are facing the darkness Face the light  
Each time I refuse to forgive another who I deem to have wronged me  
Each time I settle for disruption, acrimony, bitterness, resentment and anger over peace, healing, reconciliation and the surrender of my hard earned rights

I hear the voice beat of Jesus

You are facing the wrong way. Turn and face the light

Each time I cling too tightly to my barns and belongings as though life, happiness, fulfilment and contentment consists of what I possess I hear the voice beat of Jesus

You are facing the wrong way

Turn and face the light

The Guru's e-mail's right, Get death over with, start walking toward the light of that childlikeness without which we cannot even enter the Kingdom

It's that voice beat we hear again now. Normality is not normal. Walking with our faces to the dark is not Christ's way "The darkness is past, says the Voice, "the day is at hand."

It's that Voice again. Turn, and walk in the light.

This week a friend in Adelaide sent me an email describing how he had pulled up at traffic lights when he noticed a car in the left lane, a lane for those wishing to turn left. The driver, a smartly dressed attractive woman in her sixties caught his attention. She indicated she was in the wrong lane. Could he let her in? He did and as she pulled off she waved and blew him a kiss.

Then, he says, I noticed the bumper sticker on her car. She was not only sassy and attractive but she was also a woman of strong feminist convictions who apparently was a devotee of old time ball room dancing because the sticker mentioned two of ball room dancing's old time greats, Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire.

The inscription read:

**Listen buddy. .Ginger Rogers did everything that Fred Astaire did,  
And she did it backwards and on high heels!**

St Paul's right. Jesus did everything God did but he did it backwards and riding on a donkey.

To-day is Palm Sunday ... Listen for the voice beat that tells us to turn around and live the other way, to get off our high horse and ride a donkey.