

“The Donkey and the Colt”

A Homily on Palm Sunday

By the Scholar Origen



Now Jesus is the Word of God which goes into the soul that is called Jerusalem, riding on the donkey freed by the disciples from its bonds. That is to say, in the simple language of the Old Testament, interpreted by the two disciples who loose it: in the first place he who applies what is written to the service of the soul and shows the second place he who brings to light by the things which lie in shadow the good and true things of the future.

But He also rides on the young colt, the New Testament; for in both alike we find the word of truth which purifies us and drives away all those thoughts in us which incline to selling and buying. But He does not come alone to Jerusalem, the soul, nor only with a few companions; for many things have to enter into us before things have to come after Him, all, however, hymning and glorifying Him and placing under Him their ornaments and vestures, so that the beasts He rides on may not touch the ground, when He who descended out of heaven is seated on them. But that His bearers, the old and the new words of Scripture, may be raised yet higher above the ground, branches have to be cut down from the trees that they may tread on reasonable expositions. But the multitudes which go before and follow Him may also signify the angelic ministrations, some of which prepare the way for Him in our souls, and help in their adorning, while some come after His presence in us, of which we have often spoken, so that we need not now adduce testimonies about it. And perhaps it is not without reason that I have likened to a donkey the surrounding voices which conduct the Word Himself to the soul; for it is a beast of burden, and many are the burdens, heavy the loads, which are brought into view from the text, especially of the Old Testament, as he can clearly see who observes what is done in this connection on the part of the Jews. But the foal is not a beast of burden in the same way as the donkey. For though every load of the latter be heavy to those who have not in themselves the up bearing and most lightening power of the Spirit, yet the new word is less heavy than the old.

I know some who interpret the tied-up donkey as being believers from the circumcision, who are freed from many bonds by those who are truly anti spiritually instructed in the word; and the foal they take to be those from the Gentiles, who before they receive the word of Jesus are free from any control and subject to no yoke in their unbridled and pleasure-loving existence. The writers I am speaking of do not say who those are that go before and who those are who follow after; but there would be no absurdity in saying that those who went before were like Moses and the prophets, and those who followed after, the holy Apostles.

To what Jerusalem all these go in it is now our business to enquire, and what is the house which has many sellers and buyers to be driven out by the Son of God. And perhaps the Jerusalem above to which the Lord is to ascend driving like a charioteer those of the circumcision and the believers of the Gentiles, while prophets and Apostles go before Him and follow after Him (or is it the angels who minister to Him, for they too may be meant by those who go before and those who follow), perhaps it is that city which before He ascended to it contained the so-called "spiritual hosts of wickedness in heavenly places," or the Canaanites and Hittites and Amorites and the other enemies of the people of God, and in a word, the foreigners. For in that region, too, it was possible for the prophecy to be fulfilled which says, "Your country is desolate, your cities are burned with fire, your land, strangers devour it in your presence." For these are they who defile and turn into a den of robbers, that is, of themselves the heavenly house of the Father, the holy Jerusalem, the house of prayer; having spurious money, and giving pence and small change, cheap worthless coinage, to all who come to them. These are they who, contending with the souls, take from them what is most precious, robbing them of their better part to return to them what is worth nothing. But the disciples go and find the donkey tied and loose it, for it cannot have Jesus on account of the covering that is laid upon it by the law. And the colt is found with it, both having been lost till Jesus came; I mean, namely, those of the circumcision and those of the Gentiles who afterwards believed.

But how these are sent back again after Jesus has ascended to Jerusalem seated upon them, it is some what dangerous to say; for there is something mystical about it, in connection with the change of saints into angels. After that change they will be sent back, in the age succeeding this one, like the ministering spirits, who are sent to do service for the sake of them who will thereby inherit salvation.

But if the donkey and the foal are the Old and the New Scriptures, on which the Word of God rides, it is easy to see how, after the Word has appeared in them, they are sent back and do not wait after the Word has entered Jerusalem among those who have cast out all the thoughts of selling and buying. I consider, too, that it is not without significance that the place where the donkey was found tied, and the foal, was a village, and a village without a name. For in comparison with the great world in heaven, the whole earth is a village where the donkey is found tied and the colt, and it is simply called "the village" without any other designation being added to it.

From Bethpage Matthew says the disciples are sent out who are to fetch the donkey and the colt; and Bethpage is a priestly place, the name of which means "House of Jaw-bones." So much we have said, as our power allowed, on the text of Matthew, reserving for a further opportunity, when we may be permitted to take up the Gospel of Matthew by itself, a more complete and accurate discussion of his statements. Mark and Luke say that the two disciples, acting on their Master's instructions, found a foal tied, on which no one had ever sat, and that they loosed it and brought it to the Lord. Mark adds that they found the foal tied at the door, outside on the road.

But who is outside? Those of the Gentiles who were strangers from the covenants, and aliens to the promise of God; they are on the road, not resting under a roof or a house, bound by their own sins, and to be loosed by the twofold knowledge spoken of above, of the friends of Jesus. And the bonds with which the foal was tied, and the sins committed against the wholesome law and reproved by it for it is the gate of life in respect of it, I say, they were not inside but outside the door, for perhaps inside the door there cannot be any such bond of wickedness.

But there were some persons standing beside the tied-up foal, as Mark says; those, I suppose, who had tied it; as Luke records, it was the masters of the foal who said to the disciples, Why loose you the foal? For those lords who subjected and bound the sinner are illegal masters and cannot look the true master in the face when he frees the foal from its bonds. Thus when the disciples say, "The Lord has need of him," these wicked masters have nothing to say in reply. The disciples then bring the foal to Jesus naked, and put their own dress on it, so that the Lord may sit on the disciples' garments which are on it, at His ease. What is said further will not, in the light of Matthew's statements, present any difficulty; how "They come to Jerusalem, and entering into the temple He began to cast out them that sold and bought in the temple," or how "When He drew nigh and beheld the city He wept over it; and entering into the temple He began to cast out them that sold." For in some of those who have the temple in themselves He casts out all that sell and buy in the temple; but in others who do not quite obey the word of God, He only makes a beginning of casting out the sellers and buyers. There is a third class also besides these, in which He began to cast out the sellers only, and not also the buyers. With John, on the contrary, they are all cast out by the scourge woven of small cords, along with the sheep and the oxen. It should be carefully considered whether it is possible that the changes of the things described and the discrepancies found in them can be satisfactorily solved by the anagogic method. Each of the Evangelists ascribes to the Word different modes of action, which produce in souls of different tempers not the same effects but yet similar ones. The discrepancy we noticed in respect of Jesus' journeys to Jerusalem, which the Gospel now in hand reports quite differently from the other three, as we have expounded their words, cannot be made good in any other way.

John gives statements which are similar to those of the other three but not the same; instead of branches cut from the trees or stubble brought from the fields and strewed on the road he says they took branches of palm trees. He says that much people had come to the feast, and that these went out to meet Him, crying, "Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord," and "Blessed is the King of Israel." He also says that it was Jesus Himself who found the young donkey on which Christ sat, and the phrase, young donkey, doubtless conveys some additional meaning, as the small animal afforded a benefit not of men, nor through men, but through Jesus Christ.

John more over does not, anymore than the others, reproduce the prophetic words exactly; instead of them he gives us "Fear not, O daughter of Zion; behold your King cometh sitting" (instead of "mounted") "on the foal of all donkey" (for "on a donkey and a young foal"). The words "Fear not, daughter of Zion," are not in the prophet at all. But as the prophetic utterance has been applied by all in this way, let us see if there was not a necessity that the daughter of Zion should rejoice greatly and that the greater than she, the daughter of Jerusalem, should not only rejoice greatly but should also proclaim it when her King was coming to her, just and bringing salvation, and meek, having mounted a donkey and a young colt. Whoever, then, receives Him will no longer be afraid of those who are armed with the specious discourses of the heterodox, those chariots of Ephraim said to be destroyed by the Lord, nor the horse, the vain thing for safety, that is the mad desire which has accustomed itself to the things of sense and which is injurious to many of those who desire to dwell in Jerusalem and to attend to the sound word. It is also fitting to rejoice at the destruction by Him who rides on the donkey and the young foal of every hostile dart, since the fiery darts of the enemy are no longer to prevail over him who has received Jesus to his own temple. And there will also be a multitude from the Gentiles with peace at the Savior's coming to Jerusalem, when He rules over the waters that He may bruise the head of the dragon on the water, and we shall tread upon the waves of the sea and to the mouths of all the rivers on the earth. Mark, however, writing about the foal, reports the Lord to have said, "Whereon never man sat;" and he seems to me to hint at the circumstance that those who afterwards believed had never submitted to the Word before Jesus' coming to them. For of men, perhaps, no one had ever sat on the foal, but of hearts or of powers alien to the Word some had sat on it, since in the prophet Isaiah the wealth of opposing powers is said to be borne on donkeys and camels. "In the distress and the affliction," he writes, "the lion and the lion's whelp, whence also the offspring of flying asps, who carried their riches on donkeys and camels." The question occurs again, for

those who have no mind but for the bare words, if according to their view the words, “whereon never man sat,” are not quite meaningless. For who but a man ever sits on a foal?