

Caleb's Donkey

by Joy Kingsbury-Aitken

In a small village like Bethphage the purchase of a donkey was a big event. Each harvest season old Caleb had gathered in the nuts from the almond tree that grew beside the doorway of his one room dwelling. For almost a decade he had put a few of the coins earned from the sale of these almonds into a clay money jar, which he had kept hidden out of sight of nosy tax collectors and inquisitive neighbours, until he had enough money saved to buy a donkey. His purchase was a young animal, a colt only just independent of its mother. The donkey appeared to have a placid temperament, seemingly unconcerned by all the attention it was generating. The village children in particular were excited by the donkey's arrival in their midst. They chattered noisily as they gathered around the creature, patting its back, scratching behind its ears, and poking handfuls of grass towards it, which the donkey obligingly munched upon. Their excitement was mirrored by old Caleb's, although he didn't show it so audibly. At long last he would not need to struggle up the hillside, bent double by the weight of the bundle of willow sticks gathered from the valley floor, which he needed to carry up to Bethphage to fuel his cooking fire. In fact the donkey would be able to carry many more sticks than he could manage, so he would not need to go down into the valley and climb back up to his home so often. Then when the olives were harvested, he would not have to shoulder the baskets of ripe fruit to take to the oil press at Gethsemane, nor personally carry the jars of oil to the market place from there. The donkey was going to make a huge difference in his life. Living was going to become so much easier.

As newsworthy as Caleb's new donkey was to the villagers, there was something even more interesting that was attracting much excitement. Pilgrims passing through the village on their way to Jerusalem for the Passover festival, had informed them that the miracle working rabbi from Galilee was staying with Simon the Leper in Bethany, a nearby community on the other side of the summit. Everyone had heard about this man and his wonderful healing powers. Some were even speculating about whether he was the long promised Messiah, God's anointed who would rid the Jews of their oppressors. In Caleb's opinion it was wiser to keep one's thoughts about that to oneself. The ruling elite were in cohorts with the Roman occupiers, and who knew if one's neighbour was in such a desperate plight as to be willing to be bribed into becoming an informer. Your best friend could be spying on you for all you knew.

Lost in such thoughts, Caleb suddenly returned to the present when he noticed two young men, strangers to Caleb, not just admiring his donkey but untying it from its hitching post, the almond tree.

"Stop!" shouted Caleb as he hurried as quickly as his old legs would take him towards his precious animal, that appeared to be about to be stolen. "What do you think you're doing?"

"The Lord needs this donkey and will return it soon," one of the young men said by way of explanation.

“Well I have a greater need of my donkey than your lord,” said Caleb. “He can buy his own donkey, or just walk like I have done all my life.”

Caleb was becoming very angry and quite agitated, when he felt a hand on his shoulder. Turning around he found the hand belonged to his nephew – the son of his widowed sister, who helped him each year gather in his olives. He spoke quietly to Caleb so that no one would overhear.

“Uncle, the young men are disciples of the prophet from Galilee. I’ve just come from Bethany where I heard the holy man give instructions to them to borrow your donkey. Perhaps you had better do as they ask. I’m sure no harm will come to your animal and it will be returned to you.”

Now Caleb had a dilemma. If he refused and the man was the Messiah, then he would be opposing the will of God, but if the man was a charlatan he might never see his most precious donkey ever again, and the benefits he had envisaged from having the animal in his old age would never be realised. “Very well,” said Caleb reluctantly, “you may borrow my donkey for your lord, but my nephew will accompany you to make sure you keep your word, and I get it back.”

“Thank you Sir,” said one of the young men. “We will return your donkey to you as soon as our rabbi Jesus has no further need of him.” They untied the donkey and lead it away up the pathway to where their teacher was waiting. Caleb watched until his donkey, his nephew and the young men were out of sight. He hoped he’d done the right thing. He hoped his nephew would return with the colt before the end of the day.

It wasn’t long before the sound of a great crowd shouting “Hosanna,” meaning save us now, and singing phrases from the psalms could be heard. When they came into view there in the midst of the palm waving throng was a man sitting astride Caleb’s donkey, which had never been ridden before. He did not seem to be much enjoying the adulation of the crowd. Rather he had a solemn, even a sad expression. Hardly what one would expect on the face of a man being hailed as the king of Israel.

As the procession entered Bethphage the man looked directly at Caleb and smiled. In that brief moment a bond was formed between the man riding the donkey and its owner. Without conscious thought Caleb joined the jubilant crowd, and was soon tearing fronds from palm trees along the route to lay on the road before the prophet, and chanting in unison with the crowd, “Praise God for the Son of David! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Praise God in the highest heaven.”

When the procession reached the entrance to the temple, some of the Pharisees who were there to worship were disturbed by the noise of the crowd and by what the people were singing and shouting. They said to the prophet, “Rabbi, rebuke your followers for saying things like that.”

He replied to this criticism, “If they kept quiet, the stones along the road would burst into cheers!” He then dismounted, indicated that the crowd should disperse, and instructed his disciples to return the donkey to its owner, as he himself entered the temple complex.

Caleb retrieved his donkey, and with steps more light-hearted than they had been in many years began the return journey up to his home, accompanied by his sister's son.

"What a great day this has been," he said to his nephew, "and you my donkey have been in the middle of it all."

"Perhaps your donkey will become as famous as the donkey that carried Balaam and was stopped in its tracks by an angel, or the donkey that Solomon rode at his coronation," said Caleb's nephew.

"Perhaps he will be even more famous than either of them," said Caleb with a satisfied smile. He reached down to give the little donkey an affectionate scratch, and made a mental note to feed it an especially large amount of grass when they got home.