

WITH THE YOUNG IN HEART

Have you ever ridden a donkey? When I was a little boy living in Temuka, in the summertime my mother took us four kids in the bus to Caroline Bay in Timaru for a picnic day. We swam in the sea and played in the sand making sandcastles, and we got sunburnt. One highlight was when we had a ride on a donkey. It was a pretty slow donkey, but that didn't matter. The donkey walked along the beach at the water's edge. I think it cost sixpence for each ride. Sixpence would probably be worth about two dollars these days.

When I lived in South Auckland I worked for a time in a Church place called Friendship House. One day we had a Fair to raise some money for Friendship House. One man brought along a donkey to give rides to people, and I said that I wanted a ride before the day was over, but couldn't have right there and then. When the day finished I turned up for my ride, only to discover that the owner had taken off the saddle where people sat on the donkey, and the bridle which was the straps that were on the donkey's head and two ran from the donkey's mouth that had some metal in it by which you could steer which way you wanted the donkey to go. You pulled on one side to have the donkey go that way.

The saddle and the bridle had been taken off and the man didn't want to put them back again, it would take some time, so he said for me to ride it without them, it would be OK. So I hopped on ready to ride the donkey bare-backed. But before I was properly on, he gave the donkey a sharp slap on the rump, and the donkey suddenly took off, I very nearly fell off, but managed to grab hold of its mane, that is the long hair hanging from the neck of the donkey, and pulled myself up straight, but I still wasn't safe, and next I closed my knees tightly against the donkey's neck and held on tight while I had fast ride.

Then I said to myself, how did I know to press my knees in like that? I had never ridden a donkey again since I was a child on Caroline Bay in Timaru. It seemed like it was something I must have learned sometime, but I don't know where and when. It is a mystery to me.

Did you know that all donkeys these days have the marks in their fur of a cross? It runs right along the top of their bodies about 5 centimetres wide, and another cross piece shows right down each side of the donkey. It is said that those crosses first showed up after Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem a week before he died on a Cross. But that's another story!

This toy donkey hasn't got cross marks on it. Maybe whoever made it didn't know about the cross on donkeys. Or maybe it is too young, and perhaps the cross might grow in when a donkey gets older and new hair grows in. I don't know.

Now we are going to learn/sing the donkey song:

DONKEY SONG: I couldn't sing lullaby songs, you know,
When Jesus was born in a manger low,
I'm only a donkey, both stubborn and slow;
But I cried, "Hee Haw Hee Haw Hee Haw,"
And that means 'Praise be to God!'

HYMN 187: Trotting Trotting Through Jerusalem

SERMON:

Let us pray: May the words from my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts
be acceptable in your sight, O God,
our strength and our redeemer. And together we say 'Amen.'

Christmas Time is also a time we know as the Incarnation. It has to do with the time when Jesus the Son of God was born as a human person. When Paul wrote to Timothy he said, "God appeared in human form."

There is a school of thought which says that WE appear in human form many times over, and it is called Re-incarnation. When I was a hospital Chaplain at Middlemore Hospital in South Auckland, I approached a mature and good-looking lady in a bed, and when I introduced myself she said very nicely, "You won't want to talk to me." When I asked why that might be, she said, "Because I believe in Re-incarnation." I said that I am very interested in what other people believe, so would you tell me about it?" For the next twenty minutes or so we had an interesting discussion. I don't know a lot of what they believe: what follows is my understanding and my thoughts of what it is about.

The theory is that our soul or spirit or heavenly being sometime after our death is used again, and comes back to earth in a different body as a different person, and does that many times over. There is some kind of economy in this, that God doesn't have to create new souls all the time, but recycles the existing ones.

This seems to be done with spaces between of several generations, perhaps on average every 100 years or so. I did read once of a young man who came back in the same generation, he said, and he recognised that he was in the same location, and there was the young widow to whom he said he had been married, and he tried to re-establish that relationship, but she didn't recognise him, and wouldn't have anything to do with him.

But why come back? Imagine all the people in the world who die today passing through the pearly gates into heaven. What a mixed bag of people, of all ages and at all stages of growth and development. Young and old, good and bad, some who have learned a lot and others who haven't progressed much at all. The thing is, for those people, their time on earth is up, and they are ready for the next stages of their growth as persons. In the meantime, if we are still alive in this world there are still things to learn, and change about ourselves,

When I was a young minister in Southland, a man who was one of our Elders was tragically killed in a car accident. In reflecting on his life, my then wife, who was specially insightful about some things, observed that she thought that he had developed as a person as far as he could go. That seemed to be possible, even though the way he died was so terrible.

When we die, they say we enter into the realms of heaven, to continue in the next stage of development. As risen souls we don't sit around on clouds in white robes playing a harp all the time. There may be some of that, though - one fellow student I roomed with was very musical, and he said he looked forward to singing in a heavenly choir conducted by none other than Johann Sebastian Bach.

But first, in the presence of other heavenly persons and before God, we will see ourselves as we really are, with all our shortcomings and imperfections and inadequacies, and want to make some appropriate changes in our characters. This takes effort and time. Like on earth we develop only slowly and we don't work at it all the time, for there are other things to engage in. One day in South Auckland I met a lovely young lady who reminded me she had attended one of my weekend workshops on personal growth, and it had taken all of the six months since then for her to work

through all the issues that had come up for her. As well as taking time, this stage of our development can only go so far.

Then the time comes when to go on to the next stage, we need to return to earth. Surely you would think that the school of heaven would cater for all stages. Not so, it seems. We have to go through the good times and the difficult times of living on earth again. One of the things needful for our development is suffering, and there is no suffering in heaven. The Book of Revelation in Chapter 21 at v 3 says: "Now God's home is with people..... God will live with them, and they shall be God's people... God will wipe away all tears from their eyes. There will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain, for those things have passed away."

So suffering and difficulties are part of the mix in our earthly lives, and why? St Paul at the beginning of Romans 5 says, "Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us." (RSV).

So this is saying that to achieve the next stage of our development we have to return to earth. Apparently then we work out when we are ready, and choose where in the world we are to go for the best experience of what growth is needed. Apparently also we even choose our parents, and I must say it took me a while to get my head round that one. And so we are re-incarnated.

And we keep on returning until finally we are so well developed that we can live with God in perfection, known as the third heaven. This seems to be what is behind what St Paul says at the beginning of 2nd Corinthians 12, "I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven- whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into Paradise." As we progress we become more and more like Jesus, and thus fit to live in heaven with him. Jesus himself of course needed only one incarnation, being fully human and fully divine,

In 1983 I met with a clairvoyant who told me something of my past lives. Apparently, I have been a priest and a doctor many times over through hundreds of years, including being a witch-doctor at one stage. He said that in one life I lived in Jesus' time, and I used to listen to him as he preached and taught in the market-place in Nazareth before he began his ministry. At that time he said I was the owner of several inns, and I used to go from one to the other riding a donkey collecting the rents, until I was attacked by robbers and killed, and robbed of the money I carried.

Riding a donkey! Is that where I learned to press my knees into the neck of the donkey in order to stay mounted when it decided to take off?? Who knows?

There is one other thing: In 1 Corinthians 12, St Paul talks about gifts of the Spirit, the first and least of which is speaking in tongues. Many years ago I was given the gift of tongues, which I haven't used very often, but to pray in tongues has been very helpful at times over the years. Different tongues bear all the marks of ancient languages, and it has been suggested that these may be languages that were used at different re-incarnations, and are stored in our subconscious, and accessed by those given the gift by the Holy Spirit. Being able to interpret those languages is another gift of the Holy Spirit.

Now do I believe in all this re-incarnation stuff? I am not committed to believing it as I believe in God or Jesus and the Christian way of life. It's a matter of personal faith. But to me much of it makes a lot of sense, and all I can say is, it is perfectly possible.

Amen. So it may be.

Ivan Pierce

HYMN Love Divine all loves excelling. (148: Tune ii Hyfrydol)