

Sermon at Evening Prayer on 25 April 2021

by Rev. Bill Church

(Reading: Numbers 22-24)

The story of Balaam starts with a bit of pantomime – a talking donkey. Not an annoying talking donkey as in the Shrek films, but a wise and perceptive donkey.

Balaam is riding along when the donkey sees, but Balaam does not see, an angel of the Lord with a drawn sword, barring the way. The donkey stops, Balaam beats her and the donkey launches into a little speech about what a loyal beast she has been. Only then does Balaam spot the angel.

So, it starts with a bit of pantomime making Balaam look bad, both unperceptive and, perhaps even worse to English sensibilities, cruel to animals.

It starts with pantomime but ends with an act of real personal courage.

Balaam has been hired by King Balak to curse the assembled children of Israel as they approach Balak's territory. But Balaam listens to the Lord's command and instead blesses them three times.

Understandably, Balak is angry and sends Balaam off without his fee. Balaam loses his fee but he could have lost his life.

Warring kings of that time were not known for their forgiving nature. So, Balaam spoke as God wished, not as his rich and powerful sponsor wanted, which was an act of real courage.

There is a lesson here.

Balaam did not speak out for cash (he lost by it), nor to curry favour (quite the opposite), nor to gain notoriety for himself.

He did not speak out to promote a book or an interview with a newspaper; he did not speak out to advance his career, nor to frustrate a rival, nor to prop up a claim for damages, nor to boost a political cause. He did not speak out to pursue a grudge or from personal malice.

There ought to be an annual Balaam Prize for selfless truth-tellers. There ought to be many sponsors lining up to fund it, but there will not be. And there ought to be many candidates, but there may not be.

So, we will all have to compete for the Balaam Prize without any prizes.

And we should learn another lesson from Balaam.

He managed to make his point to Balak firmly but reasonably. He did not rant, he did not exaggerate, he was not offensive. It was the message that was important not the performance - in other words, no pantomime.