

Wednesday February 24<sup>th</sup>: Balaam: [Numbers 22: 1-38](#); [24: 1-13](#):

**'I could not...go beyond the command of the Lord'**



*Donkeys, Nazareth Village reconstruction*

Do we go along with the crowd or do we listen to what our heart is telling us? Do we 'follow the money' or do we focus our lives on doing the right thing regardless of the financial cost? These are the sorts of questions thrown up by the story of the somewhat enigmatic Balaam. He is depicted as a sort of professional soothsayer, a cross between a prophet and a diviner, on hire to Balak, the king of Moab, with the specific job of cursing the advancing

Israelites who are threatening his territory as they continue their journey to the Promised Land.

In the Bible his subsequent reputation seems to have suffered somewhat as in the New Testament, both Peter (2 Peter 2 v 15-16) and Jude (v 11) disapproved strongly of his 'cash for curses' mode of employment. However today's reading, complete with talking donkey, represents an occasion when he was demonstrably unable to do his job in the way his royal employer required of him.

Balak hires him for the simple reason that he is terrified of the Israelites following their military victory over the Amorites (22 v 2-3). As far as he is concerned, if Balaam does his job properly, for which he will be extremely well remunerated (22 v 17), Balak will at least have a shot at defeating them (22 v 6). It sounds a bit like an ancient version of something called the 'speech act theory' in which forms of words in and of themselves carry out an action. At a key point in the wedding service the celebrant says of the couple being married, 'I therefore proclaim that they are husband and wife'. The words perform the action; the couple are now married (unlike in Gilbert and Sullivan's comic opera *The Mikado* in which if you say it's done you can pretend it's done which sums up much of the political life of the early twenty first century). So, in the same way, once Balaam has pronounced a curse on the Israelites, they are cursed – end of!

On the surface, it's a pretty straightforward job – curse the Israelites and collect the money. The problem is that he simply can't do it. He is not an Israelite but nonetheless he starts having conversations with God which render him powerless to curse and therefore cost him his fee. Like all of us, he appears to have had mixed motives, which explains why, even after agreeing to go with Balak's men at God's behest (v 20), he then finds his way blocked by an angel (v 22f) – perhaps he had had second thoughts overnight and remembered the money on offer!

Following his conversation with his donkey (reminding us that, whatever the historical core of this story, it has clearly been embellished!) and his encounter with an angel en route, when he finally meets Balak he fully and finally realises that cursing those whom God has blessed can't be done. In other words, he has to do and say the right thing in spite of any financial misgivings he might have had. In Numbers chapters 23 and 24 Balaam's words of blessing are recorded for us and the message is unambiguous; if even a mercenary soothsayer who seems to be devoid of any moral compass ends up, for once in his life, doing and saying the right thing, how much more, as God's people, should we listen to his still, small voice when faced with difficult choices in life. It might well be that the course of action that God calls us to is very far from being the most financially advantageous, the least

complex or the easiest. But when we know in the core of our being where God is leading us we just need to do the right thing. This is not the same as being reckless and we always need to stop, think and pray rather than rush headlong, taking into account what our sense of vocation (whether that be a major decision affecting our career or a sense that someone in need requires our help) will mean for those we love and care for. But we are called to offer an alternative way of doing life to the one that obsesses over financial gain, ambition, looking good and finding significance in what we possess rather than who we are. Our spiritual health depends on it.

It's worth bearing in mind that Moses, not mentioned in this story as such but hovering over it as the leader of the people who are disturbing Balak's peace of mind, himself gave up a position of privilege in Egypt to follow God's call to set his people free. As Christians we need also to remember that Jesus lived with and ministered to those on the margins of society rather than its movers and shakers, and brought blessing to many who were living without hope. We are called to extend that blessing as we share his love, work for justice and peace, come alongside the broken hearted, give generously and pray for those in any kind of need. Framing our lives around what is advantageous to us without giving any thought to the needs of others is a road to nowhere. This will have implications for how we use the resources entrusted to us by God (especially as those living in one of the richest nations on earth in which the divide between the rich and powerful and the poor and most vulnerable is stark). It also has implications for how we respond to such things as the way global trading arrangements benefit wealthy countries and how the effects of climate change are visited most lethally on those least responsible for them. Let us learn not to be a curse to those who suffer because of our desire for a comfortable life and learn to be a blessing as we (with reference to the examples given above) buy responsibly and reduce our carbon footprint. It will mean some giving up on our part but we do this and more as those who follow the one who gave up everything for us.

**Questions:** Why is the love of money the root of all evil? What might we need to give up in order to respond to the challenges of climate change?

**Prayer:** Lord, help us when we make important decisions to do the right thing rather than that which suits us best. Amen.