

**Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting
April 5, 2009**

“Tattered Outlaws of the Light”

By Donne Hayden

*Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of
Jerusalem!*

*See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation,
gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

*I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war-horses
from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken.*

*He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from
sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.*

–Zechariah 9:9-9:10

Today is Palm Sunday, when, according to tradition, Christians celebrate the day in the week before Passover when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem for the last time. His entry into the city was perceived as “triumphal,” and people spread branches along the way before him. It was customary at the time, especially among the various mystery religions, to cover “the path of someone thought worthy of the highest honor.”¹ It was also customary for great leaders, especially military leaders, to ride horses. So it is highly significant that Jesus came, “righteous,” “gentle,” and riding a lowly donkey—perhaps even just a colt, the *unbroken* colt of a donkey. (The gospels are a bit inconsistent in their descriptions, but all four reference the passage in Zechariah, thereby claiming it as prophetic proof of Jesus’ status as the rightful “king” of Judea, the kingdom of Judah, a son of Jacob, who wrestled with a mysterious stranger and whose name was thus changed to “Israel” which means “one who wrestles with God.”)

¹ "Palm Sunday." *New World Encyclopedia*. 28 Jun 2008, 02:12 UTC. 4 Apr 2009, 09:49 <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Palm_Sunday?oldid=746075>.

So Jesus entered Jerusalem on a lowly beast of burden; not on a prancing war horse, but on a donkey. G. K. Chesterton wrote a poem about Palm Sunday from the point of view of the donkey Jesus rode.

*When fishes flew and forests walked
And figs grew upon thorn,
Some moment when the moon was blood
Then surely I was born.*

*With monstrous head and sickening cry
And ears like errant wings,
The devil's walking parody
On all four-footed things.*

*The tattered outlaw of the earth,
Of ancient crooked will;
Starve, scourge, deride me: I am dumb,
I keep my secret still.*

*Fools! For I also had my hour;
One far fierce hour and sweet:
There was a shout about my ears,
And palms before my feet. ²*

The poem is quite odd, but it speaks to me, especially the phrase, “The tattered outlaw of the earth” who also “had [his]hour/ One far fierce hour” when *There was a shout about [his] ears,/ And palms before [his] feet.*

As Chesterton would have it, the donkey is a comical creature often mistreated, but this “tattered outlaw” for “one far fierce hour” played a central role in the Easter story.

When the law of the land is darkness, one who follows the Light is an outlaw. I am moved by Chesterton’s image of the donkey that Jesus rode as a “tattered outlaw” in service to the Lord of Light. I am led to think of others I have known who seemed to do

² “The Donkey” by G. K. Chesterton.

this, i.e., follow the Light and go against prevailing values of those around them. One instance of such “tattered outlaws” is a class of disabled students that I encountered at Monte Vista High School. I was not their teacher; they were mine.

In 1996, I returned to the States after teaching overseas for five years, and, desiring to simplify my life, took a position as English teacher and cheerleader sponsor in Monte Vista, a small town in southern Colorado. I stayed only one year and it was perhaps the hardest year I ever had as a teacher.

I do not know why or how, but a disproportionate number of kids in the school were just mean—they were mean to me, they were mean to each other. It was the in-thing to be a mean and remorseless bully.

For example, once during class I was trying to engage them in a discussion of a short story we had just read. I asked a question related to the plot of the story: “What would you do if you knew you had only six months to live?” One boy blurted out, “I’d kill as many people as I could.” Shocked, I asked him why. “Because I could and no one could punish me.” Another student dared to ask, “Aren’t you afraid of going to Hell?” Knowing he was from a Catholic family, I asked him if he believed that God might frown on indiscriminate killing. “That doesn’t matter,” he said. “I’d get away with it--I’d just go to Confession afterwards and be forgiven.” One of my other students bragged about having already served time in an adult prison. He was not as hateful as some of the kids from “good families” in town who were quite simply, *mean*.

In one 11th grade English class in particular, kids who were interested or wanted to learn were literally *afraid* to say anything during class because they would be cruelly and sarcastically “put down” by others in the class who did not respond to anything I did. They were experts at cutting sarcasm. Though I was an experienced teacher who

had always gotten along with kids—even unmotivated troublemakers—nothing I said or did had any effect on the behavior of these kids who dominated the class. No discipline kept them from making cruel comments; no lesson, however valuable or even entertaining, earned their interest or approval.

To make matters worse, we had no principal that year, no real adult leadership, so in a way, these unruly students ruled, and the *law* of the school, the pervasive attitude, was spiteful mean-spiritedness.

Except in the Special Education classroom. These children, each with some developmental disability, were the “tattered outlaws” at that school. I loved going into their classroom—they were cheerful, kind and friendly to all. In the hallways when they moved from their classroom to the dining hall or auditorium, they smiled at everyone and did not seem to notice the sneers and sarcasm around them. Tattered as their bodies and minds might have been, their spirits were whole; that special education class was to me an island of Light in a lake of darkness.

Another example of a remarkable “tattered outlaw” comes from a documentary I recently watched titled *Genghis Blues* about Paul Pena, a blues musician who traveled to a remote area in northern Mongolia to compete in a throat singing contest. You may have heard recordings of throat singing. It’s a very strange sound to our Western ears, a humming of two or three chords all at the same time, and all in the throat.

The film was fascinating, and Paul Pena made a deep impression on me—he reminded me of the donkey in Chesterton’s poem, for Paul Pena, too, was a “tattered outlaw.” He was humble, homely, gentle, and he exemplified the highest teachings of Christianity, although religion is not mentioned in documentary except when Paul talks about studying shamanism. Christianity is not *mentioned*; it’s only there in practice.

A little background: I doubt if any of you have heard of Paul Pena (I hadn't), but he was a talented blues musician. If you're old enough to remember the Steve Miller Band, you know "Jet Airliner," a song written by Paul Pena.

Paul, who died in 2005, was born with congenital glaucoma. Photographs of him as a child show him with a cast to his eyes, irises already whitened by a film over them. As a boy he attended Perkins School for the Blind outside Boston, and later Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts. His parents were second-generation immigrants from the Cape Verde Islands off the west coast of Africa. Both his father and grandfather were musicians which probably accounted for Paul's musical talent. Before he was five, he began picking out melodies on an old piano "found in the town dump and brought home, 'as a toy that a blind child might enjoy.'" ³ He developed perfect pitch and eventually could play "piano, guitar, upright bass, violin and 'a little trumpet.'" After college, he moved to California and played in back-up groups for performers like James Taylor and Joni Mitchell. From the early 1970s until his wife died in 1991, he played with blues greats like John Lee Hooker, B.B. King, Muddy Waters, Mississippi Fred McDowell, 'Big Bones,' and T. Bone Walker.

Here is an odd and endearing thing about Paul Pena: he listened to short-wave radio to teach himself languages like Korean. One night, "On a shortwave Radio Moscow broadcast on December 29, 1984," Paul heard strange humming and whistling sounds. He had taught himself enough Russian to understand the announcer who identified the sounds as "throat singing" from a place called Tuva in northern Mongolia. Paul "was so struck by it, he spent almost eight years trying to track down its source."⁴

³ Paul Pena website, retrieved April 4, 2009, <http://www.paulpena.com/bio.html>

⁴ Ibid.

Finally, in 1991, Paul found in a little independent music store, a recording of Tuvan music. He took it home and taught himself to make these sounds.

I want you all to go home and “Google” “Tuvan music” or “throat singing” because there is no way I can describe the sounds; as I said, they are extremely foreign to our ears. Using “an obsolete 'Opticon' scanning device which translates text into sensations” and English-Russian and Russian-Tuvan dictionaries, Paul “learned a good bit of the Tuvan language” and “taught himself vocal techniques known as 'Khoomei, Sygyt, and Kargyraa.’”⁵

Two years later, in a series of remarkable coincidences, an organization in called “Friends of Tuva,” begun by Richard Feynman and Ralph Leighton, sponsored a concert in San Francisco, where Paul lived. They brought to the United States the great Tuvan throat-singer_Kongar-ol Ondar. Paul attended and in the lobby after the performance, he “gave Kongar-ol an impromptu demonstration—and astonished him with his talent and mastery of traditional Tuvan singing.” In 1995, two years later, “Kongar-ol invited Paul to sing at the second international Khoomei Symposium and contest, held in Tuva's capital city, Kyzyl.” Ralph Deighton arranged for a film crew to go along and film the journey and event.

In the week between Paul's first performance at the contest and the next time he was scheduled to sing, he and the film crew traveled with Kongar-ol through the wild, open spaces of Mongolia by Jeep and over rough roads to meet Kongar-ol's mother.

As a blind man, Paul was vulnerable and disoriented in a foreign country; he was completely dependent on the kindness of these strangers. He was frequently ill. In the film, Paul is pale, flabby and scruffy, often unshaven (water and shaving being difficult

⁵ Ibid.

to come by), his clothes rumpled; I could almost smell the sweat. His face was difficult to look at—one eye squinted entirely shut, the other showing all white under a drooping eyelid.

“Tattered” is a good description of his physical condition, but his Spirit was wholly beautiful. I have never seen anyone so open and accepting and receptive and giving and generous-spirited. He greeted the Tuvan people warmly in their own language; he indulged them by breaking into rumbling throat-singing whenever and wherever they asked. He was always gracious. He broke all the “rules” of the American tourist, the way we act when we travel the world.

After he returned to the States, his career was briefly revived through the efforts of his friends. Having won the Tuvan throat-singing contest, Paul Pena for “One far fierce hour and sweet,” was honored; there was “a shout about [his] ears, / And palms before [his] feet.”

To me, however, his whole life was a victory, an inspiration; he was someone who could teach us all about the Christian message of loving our neighbors, no matter how far away they live. Jesus and George Fox would have approved of this—surely beloved—“tattered outlaw” who “walked lightly in the world, answering that of God in everyone.”