

# “What’s in a Name”

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## **Scripture: John 12:12-19 and John 19:16b - 25**

The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. 13 So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord — the King of Israel!” 14 Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written: 15 “Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!”

So they took Jesus, 17 and carrying the cross by himself he went out to what is called the Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. 18 There they crucified him and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. 19 Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” 20 Many of the Jews read this inscription because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek.

21 Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, “Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews,’ but, ‘This man said, I am King of the Jews.’” 22 Pilate answered, “What I have written I have written.”

23 When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. 24 So they said to one another, “Let us not tear it but cast lots for it to see who will get it.” This was to fulfill what the scripture says, “They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.” 25 And that is what the soldiers did.

## **Sermon**

Now the two days that begin and end the final week of Jesus’ life, were filled with dissonance, discord, contradictions and contrasts. Even the names we give to these two days, Palm Sunday and Good Friday seem so very, very inappropriate.

Having visited Jerusalem myself, first you would quickly notice that there are actually very few palm trees lining any approach to the city. And if you travel there sometime around Holy Week, you would be constantly greeted by groups of children handing out freshly leafed olive branches. It might make you wonder if it was more likely that it was olive branches that were waved and laid in Jesus’ path? And since the olive branch is a common sign for peace how much more appropriate would that have been to greet the true “Prince of Peace!” Maybe we should actually call today “Olive Sunday?”

Then, there is the day that ends Holy week and is named, “Good Friday?” Now I know the reasons why Jesus’ death was good for us, but still, how can the state sanctioned murder of an innocent man ever be considered as “good?” Maybe a better name would be, “Bloody Friday!”

But those are not the only pairs of troubling contradictions. We have two contrasting parades, the first is a seemingly victorious march that was the fulfillment of ancient prophecy, where a very popular and promised Messiah entered Jerusalem! But by the end of the week, that same Messiah’s march to Golgotha actually becomes the path we now call the Via Dolorosa.

And if we step back a bit and analyze the story more carefully even that “Palm” Sunday parade was less of a triumphal parade and more an event of political satire, standing in stark contrast to so many glorious military parades thrown by the empire. For you see whenever Roman generals and dignitaries would come to Jerusalem, they would arrive on the opposite side of town from where Jesus approached. They would always arrive in full pomp and regalia with their leader sitting straight up, saddled on the back of a white stallion, with Roman military might in full display. They would be greeted with loud trumpets and great cheers, for they represented the Caesar who was no mere mortal but a god bestowed with the titles, “Son of God” and the “Prince of Peace.”

Jesus’ “triumphal” parade however, would have simply looked ridiculous as he repeatedly tried to climb aboard a donkey’s colt yet to be ridden. Imagine the real scene for a moment with donkey kicking and braying, folks shouting, and Jesus the Messiah being repeatedly bucked off. It was not a military parade but a mocking, subversive, and choreographed protest action that was also full of joy and hope. But when we read John’s crucifixion narrative along with his version of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, we are also confronted with the dissonance of the triumphant “King” of Palm Sunday who, in just a few days, becomes a crucified “King?

Hailed by the crowd one day as “the King of Israel!” and then seemingly the next by the “crown” as Pilate, Caesar’s representative, hangs the declaration, “the King of the Jews,” over Jesus. But how can both be true? How can they speak afresh to us, today?

“What is Truth?” We may recall Pilate asking Jesus a few Sundays ago. Now, knowingly or not, he writes the charge against Jesus, placing it on the cross and what he wrote was actually true. But what both crowd and crown proclaim bothered the priests of Israel. First they worried that the jubilant crowd of Palm Sunday might get out of control and so they must silence this bronco buster. Then as he hung from a cross they feared about the optics or how it looked. “Don’t write that!” they boldly tell the Empire’s governor! Please clarify that Jesus is not the Messiah but a blasphemer and a

failure. And yet the truth remained, posted there on the cross for all to see. Here is the true King, the Messiah, God's chosen one. And we just crucified him... why? How does this statement strike you, today?

But allow me to perhaps end on a bit of a "lighter" note, with something that I never knew until this past week. The earliest rendering of Jesus that we have was likely the work of a Roman graffiti artist that dates to around 200 CE. It is called the "Alexamenos graffito" and you can see it in the bulletin. The image was scratched into the plaster of a wall and it depicts a Christian man, ostensibly named Alexamenos, who, according to the Greek text next to it, "worships 'his' god." In this case, a figure hanging on the cross with the head of a donkey. Yes this is true! Google it! And boy do we have a lot of work correcting all of those portraits of Jesus hanging around out there.

But as much as we might disagree with that assessment, it does seem to have been commonly believed at the time that Christians practiced onolatry or donkey-worship. This was based on the misconception that Jews also worshiped a god that took the form of a donkey and early Christians were considered to be a sect of Judaism back then in Rome.

Both the donkey's head and the crucifixion would have been considered offensive depictions by contemporary Roman society. So when combined with the inscription, then, it is commonly considered to be a mocking depiction of a Christian in the act of worship. Another interesting point is that the house where the graffiti was found was also likely to have been a boarding school for young men. So, to find derogatory images and false accusations, likely teasing the least popular kid in class in such a place, should not surprise us. Specifically, perhaps in this case, "Ha, ha, Alexamenos is so stupid, because he's a Christian who worships a crucified, donkey-headed god!

But the graffiti is also an expression that reflected what was a serious ancient bafflement that the larger society had about early Christians. After all, those early Jesus worshippers did not worship a small beast of burden, but instead, they worshipped the one who had "ridden" on top. But those Jesus people were making the truly audacious claim, that that donkey's jockey, was also the one who hung and died on a cross and as the true Messiah and "Son of God!"

Such dissonance could not have made any sense whatsoever back then. The Romans worshipped Caesar who was Divine and certainly worthy of the titles; "Son of God" and 'Prince of Peace!"

Why did they feel this way? Because the Caesars actually ruled over the largest Empire in the history of the world and also commanded the most powerful military ever assembled in order to “keep the peace!”, God is a winner after all and is always on the side of winners!

That would have been the very simple equation in the ancient world and especially in the ancient religious contexts where it was generally assumed that whoever could claim military victory must be backed by the most powerful of gods. It would have been crazy to call Jesus, a homeless man who served the poor and who was crucified by Rome, the “Son of God!” So crazy was it, that it would have been easier for non-Christians to believe that Christians worshiped a donkey-headed man, than it would have been for them believe that Jesus’ followers worshiped a man whom the Empire had executed upon a cross!

And the world, I think, continues to be baffled by a “Son of God” who rules not through fear and division but through love and unification. Our world is still baffled today, by the “Prince of Peace!” who chose radical sacrificial service instead of violence to make it happen. So how does such bafflement about Jesus’ identity and his crucifixion show up in our world today?