



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Palm Sunday

**RCL: Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew 27: 11-54**

### Lost in Translation

In the 1540s the great Finnish scholar Mikael Agricola began the project of his life: translating the New Testament into Finnish for the first time in history. It was a project of massive importance to the Finnish church, but Agricola faced a huge problem: How to make the world of the arid Judean wilderness relevant to people living near the arctic circle? Agricola is said to have found a number of beautiful turns of phrase in his work, but there was one rendering that never quite landed with his audience. Since Lions were creatures unknown to the average sixteenth century Finn, Agricola replaced the word lion with a local creature of majesty: the noble deer! Thus, 1 Peter 5:8 reads, “Your enemy the devil prowls around... like a roaring noble deer looking for someone to devour.” An image that may not have struck quite the note of satanic danger that Peter was going for.

The possibilities and pitfalls of translation appear in today’s first Gospel reading. The people of Jerusalem have spread branches upon the road. They exult the coming of Christ and shout, “Hosanna to the Son of David!... Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

“Hosanna” is a word so core to the heart of Jewish theology, so rich in meaning, that our translators have decided not to translate it at all—thus avoiding Agricola’s error. This decision, however, falls prey to an equal and opposite danger. Rather than having Hosanna interpreted to us, modern Christians have come up with a misinterpretation of our own. We now often think that Hosanna means something like “praise be!” or simply “hooray!” and imagine that the people of Jerusalem shout, “hooray for the Son of David!” But this is not the case at all.

Instead, Hosanna is a specific form of ancient Jewish prayer to God, asking for immediate salvation. It is akin to the opening words of the Book of Common Prayer’s service of Evening Prayer:

“O God make speed to save us,  
O Lord make haste to help us.”

The traditional *Hoshana* (Hosanna) prayers, recited during the Jewish festival of Sukkot, include a series of petitions for salvation, beginning with “For Your sake”: “For Your sake, our God,” “For Your sake, our Creator,” “For Your sake, our Redeemer.”

When seen in this original context, then, the people of Jerusalem are not welcoming a celebrated teacher or an impressive miracle worker; instead, the people of Jerusalem are praying to Jesus as their God and savior in their midst. This, from the perspective of first-century Judaism, would be either the most sacred thing to have ever happened, or the greatest blasphemy of all time.

With this song still echoing in our heads, we read our second Gospel and can feel dumbstruck. From the masses praising Christ, now the masses are seeking his death. We may also feel dumbstruck at the idea that anyone would want to torture and kill this most gentle, loving, and peaceful human. Why on earth would this have happened? Was there too much kindness? Too many feedings? Too many healings?

About 200 years ago, the prevailing theory was that Jesus was persecuted and killed predominately because of his scathing religious critiques: that he came to lambast Sabbath keeping and the purity laws, which offended the religious authorities so deeply, they decided to kill him. This argument, however, seems ludicrous to anyone with knowledge of Jewish history.

There were innumerable sects of Judaism in Christ's day, each teaching contradictory principles. No one ever crucified a member of the Essene sect for denying the validity of the sacrifices in the Temple; no one ever persecuted the Sadducees for saying that most of the Old Testament wasn't holy scripture. A wise country rabbi—who called for money changers to return to their proper place in the Temple, and for faithful people to purify not only plates and cups but their hearts—was so far from being a threat that he would have been utterly beneath the notice of the religious leaders of the day.

Another popular explanation for the crucifixion over the last 100 years or so, is that Jesus was a radical revolutionary, seeking to end Roman rule and overthrow an unjust government. But Jesus says to Pilate in John's Gospel, 'if I were a political prisoner, my fellow rebels would be fighting to free me, but my kingdom is not of this world.' He has raised no army; there are no weapons hidden in a warehouse: Jesus has been preaching faith, hope, and love, rather than a new dynasty or policy platform. Far from inciting a mere political revolution, Jesus has preached a message of repentance that, if we would listen, would transform every human heart, would turn the entire creation upside down.

So, if Jesus isn't crucified for being a religious critic or a political revolutionary, then what is going on here? Why do the crowds cry with one voice, "crucify him!"? In Rabbi Jacob Neusner's book *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*, he analyzes many of Jesus' best-known statements and concludes that much of what Jesus says is similar to the great rabbis of the day... with one enormous difference.

Other rabbis point to worshiping God in the Temple, to being united with God in the Torah, but Jesus doesn't merely acknowledge these teachings; over and over again, he puts himself in their place. The charge actually leveled against Jesus is a very simple one, and it's stated plainly in today's Gospel. Jesus declares himself to be the fulfillment of the Son of Man (seen in the Book of Daniel), the human-divine figure to whom God the Father gives all of God's own glory and power. "Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, 'He has blasphemed! Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your verdict?' They answered, 'He deserves death.'"

But what if this isn't blasphemy? What if this isn't antiquated mythology? What if, in fact, this simple, kind, loving rabbi is God the Son, the maker of Heaven and Earth? What if the one who tells each of us to feed, help, and even love those who hate us is Love? What if the one who tells you to take the log out of your

own eye before taking the speck out of your neighbor's eye—the one who tells you to control your own greed, selfishness, anger, unkindness, before commenting upon someone else's—is the source of all wisdom? What would it mean if the humble lover of humans—who says to the corrupt tax collector Zacchaeus, to come down from the tree, “for today I must abide at thy house,” who says to the woman caught in adultery, “Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more”—is the actual judge of each of us?

What would it mean if, not only a suffering servant, not merely a wise, loving teacher, not merely a religious leader or a political rebel, but God the Son himself hung on the cross, died in solidarity with your own death, descended to the dead, destroyed death itself, and forever freed you, specifically you, from the power of evil and sin?

Well, come to church next week and find out...

***Bertie Pearson** serves as rector of St. Alban's Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C. He also produced the popular podcast *The History of Christianity with Bertie Pearson*. This podcast is an exploration of the ideas and themes which continue to shape the Christian faith, and is available on Spotify, iTunes, and wherever fine podcasts are distributed. Before his current parish, Bertie served both Spanish and English-language churches in Austin and San Francisco, played drums in the band Poolside, and toured as a DJ. He now lives a much more sedate life with his wife, Dr. Rabel Pearson, their two children, a small room full of dusty records, and a very goodhearted Australian Shepard named Ida.*



Sermons that Work and Bible Studies that Work are a joint offering of Forward Movement and The Office of Communication at The Episcopal Church.

<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/bible-study/>

<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermons-that-work>