

Palm/Passion and paradox

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Luke describes Jesus riding heroically into Jerusalem on Palm/Passion Sunday. According to archetypal imagery, is Jesus riding to heroic victory or tragic defeat?

Luke offers hints along the way that the trajectory between Palm Sunday and Good Friday is something other than utter failure, but they're subtle hints: Jesus claims the authority to pardon even as he himself is hanging on the executioner's cross; as he dies, he continues to discuss his kingdom and paradise.

The signs of Jesus' failure are stronger (especially compared with John's account). In Luke, Jesus' only words during his interrogation are a weak-sounding, "You say so." The crowds at his death return home beating their breasts, as the entire cosmos seems to grieve—with darkness covering the whole earth and the great star-spangled curtain of the temple being torn in two.

Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem and its violent culmination are animated by contradictory images. Sylvia Dunstan's hymn "Christus Paradox" allows poetry to hold these together. To Christ who enters the holy city on this day, the hymn has us sing, "Worthy your defeat and victory." Christ is hymned as "both Lamb and Shepherd. . . prince and slave. . . peacemaker and swordbringer."

Like classic icons that visually allude to the crucifixion within images of Christ's earlier life and ministry, each stanza of this hymn paints iconography that is stereoscopic: Christ is "clothed in light upon the mountain / stripped of might upon the cross." The final stanza turns completely to praise for both the "earthly Jesus" and the "cosmic Christ," the one who is "our death and life."

Gordon Lathrop writes that these Christological tensions can be found in the very name “Jesus Christ.” Scriptural texts see *Christ*, the messiah, as the one anointed by God to carry the hopes of all humanity, even the whole creation. And yet the name speaks specifically of *Jesus*, a marginal and itinerant religious teacher, tortured and executed as a young man under imperial power.

The name “Jesus Christ” itself stands for the theologically rich ambiguity that marks this day.