

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

This is going to sound like an odd way to begin a sermon at the start of Holy Week, but please stay with me on this. As an eighth-grader, I was really looking forward to taking the Industrial Arts class.

This class was required of all boys at my school, just as the girls were required to take Home Economics in Reading, Ohio’s public school in 1960. I was intrigued by the large classroom which was full of wood lathes, table saws, work benches, and floor model belt sanders. I couldn’t wait to get my hands on those power tools!

The teacher of the class was Mr. Littrell, a stocky, gruff man who spoke with a Southern accent. My first encounter with him was in the first class at roll call. I never liked roll call because of the ease with which my last name can be mispronounced.

But Mr. Littrell pronounced Carl Erkenbrecher’s name correctly, so I was hopeful – and I was wrong to be so. Mr. Littrell didn’t say “Goertemiller;” he said, “Gurglemueller!”

The loud, raucous laughter of the other boys in that class was deafening, and my face turned beet-red. I weakly attempted to correct Mr. Littrell, but I could tell that he was enjoying the laughter, and my fate was sealed.

For the rest of the semester, Mr. Littrell would call me, “Gurglemueller,” and after a while the laughter lessened, and I even became somewhat used to it. Still, whether we laugh or cringe when our names are mispronounced, it is true that the way people address us matters.

Many of us have more names than the one on our birth certificate, and when these other names are used, they may say something about the relationships we have with the ones who are addressing us. Sometimes these other names reflect professionalism, sometimes familiarity, and oftentimes love.

Throughout today’s lengthy Gospel and the entirety of Jesus’ passion narrative in Mark, we hear people struggling to name Jesus. As he enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the crowds celebrate him as “the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” (Mark 11:9).

Pilate has a sign posted over his head on the cross identifying Jesus as the “King of the Jews,” which the religious leaders don’t like. The soldiers seem to see Jesus as delusional, mocking him for believing himself a king.

The religious leaders label him as another false messiah stirring up trouble, one who deserves what he is receiving. Then, toward the end of our Gospel, we hear one more name for Jesus, this time from an unlikely place. A Roman centurion who watches Jesus die declares, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (Mark 15:39).

All these names are attempts to label Jesus, to categorize him, to understand him. Each seems to say more about the person using the name than about Jesus. That may be why, even when Pilate asks him point-blank, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus responds with a noncommittal “You say so” (Mark 15:2).

So which is it? Is Jesus the one who comes in the name of the Lord, a false or delusional king, the messiah or God’s Son? And why doesn’t Jesus just tell us plainly which one is right, and which are wrong? He certainly could have cleared up a lot of confusion at any point along the way. Instead, he remains silent.

Jesus doesn’t give an answer because what really matters is who we say Jesus is. As our names tell us something about our connection to the people addressing us, so the way we think of Jesus tells us something about our relationship to him. Mark gives us many clues toward an answer, but leaves the decision to each of us.

Throughout today’s Gospel, Mark highlights the irony that as Pilate and his soldiers are mocking Jesus by declaring him “King of the Jews,” Jesus is becoming a king greater than any of these could ever imagine.

Mark is subtly pointing to who Jesus is by the way he tells the story of Jesus’ trial and crucifixion. These details mirror another parade, one with which Mark’s original readers would have been very familiar.

When a Roman general returned to the city of Rome after conquering a neighboring land or people, he and his victory were often celebrated with a parade through the capital city called a “triumph.”

These triumphs were such spectacles, elevating the triumphator to such a celebrated state, that by 20 B.C., such events were used only for the crowning of a new emperor. The parade celebrated the power of the emperor and linked him to the divine.

Each of those triumphal processions began with the presentation of the triumphator wearing a purple robe and a gold laurel crown. Jesus was given a purple cloth and a crown of thorns. The triumphator would then have received accolades from the soldiers. The soldiers hurl insults at Jesus.

The triumphal procession would have led the triumphator through the streets of Rome to the temple of the premier god in the Roman pantheon Jupiter Capitolinus. The temple was called the Capitolium from the Latin root for the word for “head.”

Jesus’ procession leads to Golgotha, the place of the skull. The Roman triumphal procession included a bull, which would be sacrificed at the end of the parade, and a member of the parade carrying an ax, the instrument of the bull’s impending death. Jesus, the ultimate sacrifice, is followed closely by Simon who carries Jesus’ cross.

At the Capitolium, the triumphator is exalted with one of his closest colleagues on either side. Jesus is lifted up on a cross with a criminal on either side.

Then, in case the reader has missed all the references to this Roman imperial celebration, Mark drives the point home at the moment of Jesus' death. The triumphal procession and celebration at the Capitolium was a demonstration of the emperor's close connection to Jupiter, a self-declaration that he was a son of the gods.

At the moment of Jesus' death, a lone centurion, a soldier in Pilate's army and a symbol of the empire, bestows that same title on Jesus, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

At the end of Mark 15, the ball is entirely in our court. We have to decide who Jesus is. Mark points us toward the answer, but never states it overtly. The decision of who Jesus is, is left to the reader.

When someone butchers our name, maybe we can laugh because that person knows little about us, and may not have intended any offense. The ways we are addressed by others, though, truly matter. They define for us who we are, how we see ourselves, and what we believe about ourselves.

When we hear positive names from those who love us – the nicknames, pet names and terms of endearment – we know we are loved.

But often we hear other names which can cause us to think differently. We may have been called dumb, weak, fat, ugly, or lazy.

We may have heard we're too emotional, too dramatic or too passionate. We may have received messages that we are useless, incompetent or untrustworthy. Some of us were told we were different, crazy, or disposable.

For some of us, those names stuck. We began to believe them so deeply that today we don't need anyone to say them to us anymore. When something goes wrong, when we look in the mirror, when we think about the decisions in our lives, all those negative names come flooding back.

But when we, like the centurion, call Jesus God's Son, we are not only saying something about Jesus. We are also saying something about ourselves. In him we have found that we are sheep cared for by a good shepherd. We are children who are loved and adored by our heavenly parent.

We are friends, as he calls us in John 15, of the ruler of the universe. On this Passion and Palm Sunday, we remember that we are the ones he loved so much that he suffered this brutality to conquer evil and death, to give us a new life, and to reconcile us to God and one another.

No, Jesus didn't answer Pilate's question. Mark won't answer it for us either. The decision is ours.

What we think about Jesus, the name we will call him, says a great deal about us. A new triumphator, the true Son of God, has come to lead a new kingdom.

The kingdom of God to which Jesus invites us is not one based on power and fear, not one that excludes those who don't quite measure up, and not one that conquers people with the sword.

Instead, it is a place where we belong at the table of the King, a place where the Lord suffers for our sake, a place where we are given a new identity as a child of God, no matter what name another may call us.

Mark gives us many clues about who Jesus is, but leaves the decision to us. As we enter this Holy Week, the question is now before you: who is Jesus to you? Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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