



Palm Sunday

THE NEW SHOFAR

Jesus the Messiah Worm

Kingship belongs to Yahweh, He is ruling over the nations.

Jesus the worm, something scorned by the world, despised by the people

I have always struggled with **Psalm 22**. I am both appalled and attracted to what Jesus is proclaiming from the Cross. The opening phrases are shocking and the whole thought of divine abandonment is abhorrent, especially when it is applied to Jesus. Then our Messiah acknowledges He is a worm. Not a man. A worm.

The Hebrew people well understood what He meant. Worms were creatures of decay and they were used as images of our bodies decaying in the grave...*maggots are the couch beneath you, worms your blanket*. And when unrepentant sinners die *their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be extinguished, and they shall be abhorrent to all flesh*. Remember, Jesus is the one applying this metaphor to Himself.

The worm is the biblical image of death

Jesus does this as He confronts the reality of death. He is a worm on the cross for our sakes. In taking on the image of a flesh consuming worm, Jesus is taking to himself the final humiliation of the Incarnation. The Divine Son of God as food for the worm. This is what is meant by *and the Word became flesh*. Job is always a great read and his observations on his own feelings of abandonment apply here...*How much less a human being, who is but a worm, a mortal, who is only a maggot?* (26:6). This is the level of humility willing taken on by the Christ of God.

But there is also much more to the biblical worm

The Hebrew word for worm (*tola*) is not the usual word for “worm” in the Bible (that is *rimma*). However, it is used of one species of worm and importantly, is the same word used for crimson, scarlet. That was the colour of the curtains used on both the Tabernacle and the Temple. It was the colour of the vestments used by the High Priest. Tabernacle and Temple were homes to the Ark of the Covenant, the container housing the ten commandments and manna collected during the Exodus (remembering both of these were used by the Church when speaking about Christ).

When we take this to the words of Jesus as he quotes **Psalm 22**, we have an insight into what He is proclaiming. In Him is found both the fullness of life – the glorious colour of royalty, divinity *and* the ground dwelling flesh eating worm. Whatever the cross is saying, it always has this dual proclamation.

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It is there on the cross God and the Human come together so profoundly as one. He wants this image to be a source of reflection. He would have known how the dye bearing worms (*tola*) climb a tree when they lay their eggs and attach themselves to the trunk. The hatching worms find shelter in the body of their mother and then feed on the living flesh of the worm over three days. During the process of giving birth, she secretes a purple dye over herself, the surrounding tree and the baby worms. On the fourth day, this purple colour turns to a white wax. She has given her life for the sake of a whole new generation of worms. This is the *tola – worm* Jesus speaks of when he is nailed to the cross, hanging there in pain, hanging between heaven and earth. He is not nailed there as a mighty warrior, but as a life giving worm.

The Cross as a commitment by Christ to our salvation

Christ's cry on the cross is not a cry of despair. As Calvin reminds us in his commentary on this Psalm, it is a cry most believes will utter throughout their lives as we are forced to deal with disappointments, agonies, losses and the shattering of our dreams and hopes. But Jesus reminds us God is neither blind nor deaf and throughout human history (including our own) He remains **My** God. He is the God in whom the ancestors of Israel have always placed their trust, and that trust has never been betrayed. When they cried to God, the Almighty heard their prayers and reached out to them in saving love. This is why in **verse 19** David can proclaim *but You, O Yahweh, do not be far off!* and in **verse 22** *in the midst of the congregation I will praise you!*

Jesus had every reason to be filled with despair

Jesus is brutalised, completely overwhelmed by his enemies who are described as being like savage dogs attacking a carcass: *dogs are all around me; a company of evildoers encircles me*. He likens them to *wild bulls* and *roaring lions*. That is so very much a universal human reaction, even though our own suffering and reasons for despair are small and petty in comparison. The point is, Jesus takes all of these to Himself. He did not just adopt our human features. He became human, took on the character and nature of the worm so that in him, we could all live now and forever in the love and mercy of Almighty God.

The promise of the cross is one of an enduring hope and peace and joy. These things become a reality in the cross because the death of our Messiah was not the end. It was not a defeat. It was a moment of victory, of glory and on the cross, Christ is *lifted up* so that those who take the cross as a dynamic model their ways of living in the world, will share in the promises of Easter. No cross. No hope; no salvation.

It is because Christ *has died* that Christ *is risen* and Christ *reigns*. Thus, we are filled with hope for the future, because the now reigning Christ ensures *the gates of hell will never prevail against* the Gospel truly lived and proclaimed. When our

plans for mission and ministry in the post-Easter Covid world are built on the Crucified Christ and we imitate His mission of humble service, not even Hell can stop us.