

Lo, your King comes to you

Crowds are usually associated with noise, confusion, and perhaps, also, being focussed by some dominant figure, some powerful person. One sees images of Adolf Hitler of the Third Reich, and huge crowds before him, and how he had mastery over the crowds.

Another thing about crowds is they tend to be led by, either, the current fad or current fashion, or by something that is put in their head—their collective head, so to speak—and which motivates them, moves them along, to act—sometimes for good. We have seen in the past year, in the Middle East, crowds moved to action. Those same crowds can be a source of violence, and can be led in any which way, as we know.

And crowds can also be a momentary phenomenon. They can arise, and carry out their particular moment in history, and then be gone, and be seen no more. So it is with crowds.

Well, in our passage from Mark's gospel, chapter 11, there is reference to a crowd. But the crowd is somewhat unlike other crowds, in the sense that, first of all, the focus of attention is not a powerful military leader, not a strong man, but this one whom they hail as King, who comes into Jerusalem riding on a donkey, and so fulfils the words of the prophet Zechariah, "Lo, your king comes to you, humble and riding on a the donkey, the foal of a donkey." So here we have a contrast from the usual crowd behaviour, in that, here, this one individual comes into Jerusalem in lowliness.

We can also say about this crowd that they respond to Jesus in a way which is not as though they were being moved by some demagogue, or moved by the latest advertising campaign, to say what they do say. They are moved by what they have heard and seen elsewhere, outside of Jerusalem, in Galilee, among other places. And so, they say, "Hosanna, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David. Hosanna in the highest." So the crowd seems to have it right.

Now, the crowd is a sort of momentary phenomenon here. They say their words. We read later that "Jesus went into the temple, and looked around at things, and, because it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve." So the crowd had a momentary, a temporary, life, so to speak.

But we can learn from that crowd, in the way in which, apparently, Jesus impacted them, so that they laid down their palm branches. And we learn from them by the words that they spoke of Jesus, quoting from Psalm 118, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."

But, as in all crowds, there are individuals. And so, the crowd is not just a blob. It is composed of individual persons. And we, perhaps, can identify some of the persons in the crowd. I am doing a little bit of conjecture here. But, for example, we hear—just before Jesus' entry into Jerusalem—that Jesus met Bartimaeas, at Jericho. And Bartimaeus was a blind man, who was also a beggar.

They were still around Jericho; and Bartimaeus cried out with words very similar to what the crowd would eventually say. He said, "Have mercy on me, Son of David." So he used that term, that expression, associated with the "coming kingdom of our ancestor David"—words that the crowd would use.

Now, the crowd, in this case, the crowd which was following Jesus, at Jericho, wanted to hush up Bartimaeus. They felt he was somehow disturbing Jesus, on his passage through this area. But Bartimaeus persevered; he called out, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” And Jesus responded to Bartimaeus. He received his sight, we are told, and he followed Jesus on the way.

So, perhaps, it is not unlikely that Bartimaeus was one of those people in the crowd who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem—cutting down branches of trees, and laying out garments in front of Jesus, riding into Jerusalem on a donkey.

Now, there is an account of Jesus’ ancestor, David, when he was capturing Jerusalem for the first time. Jerusalem was not always the capital of the land of Judah. For a long time, it was a stronghold of the Jebusites, a Canaanite group, which David himself had to capture. The Jebusites, believing that they were in a stronghold, that no one could storm, said, “Even the blind and lame will turn you away.” And David defied them, and said—something to the effect—“I hate the blind and the lame.”

So here we have a contrast between David, Jesus’ ancestor, and Jesus himself. Jesus hears this person [i.e. Bartimaeus], whom other people consider to be insignificant, and makes known his grace to him.

And that’s the nature of God’s grace to us. We are all, in a way, blind beggars, when it comes to our relationship with God. We are all dependent on the same grace, coming from the Gracious One, the Eternal One. There is no difference. We are all like Bartimaeus. And we can receive that grace, and find our lives re-directed and called on the Way. So, there is one individual who could have been part of the crowd.

Now, the next individual I would like to mention may or may not have been part of the crowd. But she was associated with the disciples of Jesus. This is a woman, who, when Jesus and his disciples were at the house of Simon the leper, came in and broke open an alabaster jar of ointment of pure nard—something very costly indeed—and poured it on his head.

Now, this action on her part is eloquent to an extraordinary degree. It says a variety of things to us. It could be an action of a prophet, like a prophet. Remember, for example, Samuel, anointed, with oil, both Saul and then David. So prophets were known to anoint kings. Well, this woman poured this ointment over Jesus’ head, and so anointed him. But Jesus saw this as pointing to his death. And, in fact, Jesus would be king, would achieve his victory, through his death on the cross.

Another thing one could perhaps see in this action of the woman (who may not have been in the crowd welcoming Jesus into Jerusalem) is that she was thoughtful in her approach. Evidently, she had thought, “Who is this person? How is he significant?” and came to the conclusion that he was infinitely—wonderfully—significant to her. And her action displays a type of behaviour which ought to characterize all who name themselves as followers of Christ—namely it shows an attitude of willing to give all for the sake of God who has made himself known in Christ. And this is what her action did. It showed that she was ready to give all.

The crowd in Jerusalem proclaimed their own faith. But here, in an individual, was a more considered faith, and a faith, as I have said, which was eloquent to an extraordinary degree of what it means to be a follower of Christ.

Now, towards the end of Mark's gospel—Mark, chapter 15—we read of Simon of Cyrene. He may or may not have been part of that crowd that came into Jerusalem. But he was compelled, as he came in from the countryside, to carry Jesus' cross. Jesus, evidently, was too weak at that point, to carry it himself. So they forced Simon Cyrene to carry it for him. And, as I mentioned to the children, earlier, the crowd had only to carry these palm branches, or distribute their clothing—their coats—in front of Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem. But this man, Simon of Cyrene, was compelled to carry Jesus' cross.

We don't hear that he complained about it. Perhaps we can assume the best, that he had, in fact, patiently borne this cross. And, in fact, it would seem, by the rest of what it says about Simon of Cyrene, that he and his family did become followers of Christ, because they know the name of Simon; he is the father of Alexander and Rufus. We don't know who Alexander and Rufus are, particularly, although there is a Rufus, I think, mentioned at the end of Paul's letter to the Romans. But all these early Christians knew Alexander and Rufus. Simon of Cyrene was the father of these men.

And he, in his action, of carrying the cross, shows what it means to be a follower of Christ. It's not a momentary thing; it requires endurance; it requires patience. Some things are put upon us we simply have to carry. And, as we carry them, we follow in the way of Christ.

Now, there were some other individuals who were also named. And it's pretty well a certainty that they were in the group of people who welcomed Jesus as he came into Jerusalem. And these are the various women who stood at a distance, watching Jesus as he was crucified. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and Joses, and Salome.

So these women were the ones who remained. The other disciples had fled—Peter and the others. These women, in their own way, exhibited courage. They could have fled. It wasn't forced upon them that they had to stay, and watch Jesus in his final agony. They could have left. But they chose to stay. They chose to be near the cross.

That again shows something of the Christian life. It is not a momentary thing, that crowds can be. It is a thing over a period of time, which requires courage, as we face the various hurdles that come before us, as we are ready to suffer whatever is required for the sake of the gospel.

And that's not a definition I have come up with. That's the definition of the Church, right from the beginning. To be a follower of Christ is to be ready to suffer all for the Messiah, Jesus, our Lord.

Normally, crowds have very little to tell us. The crowd of Jesus' followers does have something to tell us. But, I would say, even more, the individuals that made up the crowd, or could have made up the crowd, tell us even more of God's grace coming to us, like blind beggars, who are graced by God's love. Or like that woman who broke the alabaster vessel of pure ointment of nard, telling us that being a follower of Christ means being ready to give all, for the sake of Christ, for the sake of God making himself known in Christ. And, as Simon Cyrene, father of Alexander and Rufus, and then the women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome—all of those also instruct us in what the Christian life is to be—a readiness to endure all for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord.