

The crowd: Playing to the crowd Zechariah 9:9 & Mark 11:1-11

I remember hearing Mike Yaconelli (a Christian speaker) once explain that he had been walking through a city centre when he came across a crowd of people all staring up at the sky.

Intrigued, he joined them and like the rest lifted his head and stared intently up at the sky. After a few moments he turned to the person next to him and asked, "What are we looking at?" "I don't know," replied the other man, "but its exciting isn't it?"

And a crowd is a funny thing, it reacts in strange ways, it draws people in and can remove their spirit of independence, or alter their rational thought processes. As I prepared for this talk I came across a series of videos on You tube filmed in Japan where an unsuspecting member of the public was suddenly surrounded by a crowd. Often (without anytime at all to think about it) the individual would simply join with the crowd and do what they did.

Well, today is Palm Sunday, the day in the Christian calendar when we remember Jesus entering Jerusalem to the cheers of the crowd there, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!" they shouted (Mark 11:9-10), but within days their adulation had changed to the bloodthirsty scream of "Crucify him!"

What happened? What drove this crowd to such extremes? Was Jesus simply no good at winning the crowd over, had they seen through him, or what? Well, today we are going to look at that crowd, but let's break down their gatherings into three; before Good Friday, during Good Friday and after Good Friday.

Now, before Good Friday the crowd seemed to be totally on Jesus' side; you can sense the excitement and joy from them as he enters into Jerusalem.

They lay cloaks and palm branches before him as he rides in fulfilling Zechariah's prophecy, "Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

As the pilgrims, many of whom would have heard Jesus' teachings and seen his miraculous acts over the last three years whilst he travelled around their villages enter this holy city for the festival of Passover there is a real sense of expectation, of rescue, of hope; "Save us, Godly king, save us!" they cry.

The expectation and excitement must have mounted even further as, no doubt followed by the crowd, Jesus went into the centre of the city and cleansed the temple of the money changers, dealing a small but highly symbolic blow against the greed of Annas' family.

In fact so popular is Jesus that John tells us the Pharisees say to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!" (John 12:19). Jesus is the number one celebrity as far as they can tell, so perhaps it is no wonder that the religious rulers are delighted when Judas agrees to betray him.

Now they have an insideman, who can hand Jesus over at just the right moment but they know that they must make sure that Jesus is on his own when they move; Luke 22:6 tells us that "[Judas] consented, and watched for an opportunity to hand Jesus over to them when no crowd was present."

And so it is that when the temple guards march out in force and arrest Jesus alone with his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane he pointedly makes the observation

“Every day I was with you in the temple courts, and you did not lay a hand on me. But this is your hour— when darkness reigns.” (Luke 22:53).

So, before his arrest the crowds appear to love Jesus; many of them entering Jerusalem are familiar with him, they are impressed by him and are so committed to him that the religious authorities are afraid to touch Jesus with the crowds present.

So what happens to change their minds?

Well, move on now to Good Friday. The Passover is about to be celebrated and Pilate is faced with the problem of Jesus. Now, for all his crass insensitivities shown towards the Jews, Pilate is at heart a crowd pleaser. Remember, he had tried to impress the crowd at home with his actions in the Jerusalem Temple and when that failed he tried to please the Jews by using their temple money to build an aqueduct.

He was incompetent, but, essentially a crowd pleaser and Mark tells us in chapter 15 that Pilate has introduced a little tradition to try to please the crowd some more, in verse 6 we read; “Now it was the custom at the Feast to release a prisoner whom the people requested.”

What better way than to appear merciful and concerned with the people’s wishes than to release a poor prisoner just before a religious festival - a well regarded individual, someone everyone loves but who has sadly fallen foul of the law and ended up behind bars. So Pilate (not wishing to be the puppet of the Annas family) wheels out the crowd’s beloved Jesus – he’s sure he knows what their reaction will be; “Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?” But Pilate is going to be stunned by their answer.

You see, perhaps on Palm Sunday the crowd were beginning to really think that Jesus might be their King. On that day a young, well regarded man, fulfilling scriptural promises and challenging authority rode into Jerusalem but the figure that stood before them now looked very different indeed.

As Pilate hauled the young Galilean out before the crowd that he thought loved Jesus he was showing them a very different man to the one they recognised. Jesus now was someone who had not slept for well over 24 hours, who had been in extreme emotional distress in Gethsemane, who had been dragged from house, to palace all night, enduring one illegal trial to another, who had been spat upon, blindfolded and beaten – he is a sorry looking figure offering up no defence and no sign of defiance in the face of his accusers.

And so the chief priests have an easy job stirring up the crowd to choose Barabas instead of Jesus. Barabas is a real rebel, a proper leader, a powerful man. He is someone who has actually proved himself by striking a blow against Rome. No little irony there then when the crowd taunt Pilate threatening him that if he were to release Jesus the “king of the Jews” he would be no friend of Caesar’s.

And once the crowd has picked up the scent, the hunt is on. Crowds today can still behave in the same way. On a much lesser scale there has been the recent example of John Terry. Once hailed as Chelsea’s glorious captain, an affair with a team mate’s ex-girlfriend led websites like that of the Daily Telegraph to ask whether or not he should be booed as he went onto the pitch before the England ‘V’ Egypt match.

The result? Thousands signalled their displeasure at him by not only booing him at the start of the match, but every time he kicked the ball.

Did everyone simultaneously have the same idea? Of course not, the crowd had been stirred up and they duly obliged and that's because rational and caring individuals take on totally different personas in crowds. People no longer behave as themselves, but as a collective, so crowds are swiftly driven to reach conclusions and carry out acts which perhaps as individuals they would never have found themselves doing.

In his 1899 book called *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* Gustave Le Bon explains "Little adapted to reasoning, crowds are quick to act, how powerless they are to hold any opinions other than those which are imposed upon them.... [They are led] by seeking what produces an impression on them and what seduces them." He continued: "[Crowds possess] a collective mind which makes them feel, think and act in a manner quite different.... a sentiment of invincible power which allows [him] to yield to instincts which, had he been alone, he would... have kept under restraint."

And so it is that when Pilate realises that the crowd has turned against Jesus and asks them what they want him to do with him their response is shocking, "Crucify him! they shouted. Why? What crime has he committed? asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, Crucify him! Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified." (Mark 15:13-15). Because after all, Pilate is a crowd pleaser.

But was that the end for the crowd? Well, no, there is one further scene they appear in; let's look at them after Good Friday.

Now, remember that Pilate had tried to play to the crowd only to realise that he was being played by them, but listen to what they say when he attempts to distance himself from the actions of the mob; Matthew 27:24-26;

“When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. I am innocent of this man's blood, he said. It is your responsibility! All the people answered, Let his blood be on us and on our children! Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.”

Did you hear their statement? “Let his blood be on us and on our children!” By choosing a murderer and villain and rejecting the Lord of Life they had sent Jesus to the cross and to his death – his blood was on their hands.

Now that declaration had two implications. First, quite literally because by rejecting the humble king and choosing a rebel against Rome they reflected an attitude which would cause them to rise up against the empire and bring down Rome’s wrath upon them. The imperial backlash resulted in the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in AD70 along with a huge loss of life, indeed the blood of Jesus was upon their heads and on their children too.

But also, the crowd dramatically make the point that the blood of Jesus is on all our hands. As Stuart Townend puts it so well in his song;

“Behold the man upon a cross, My sin upon His shoulders;
Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice Call out among the scoffers.
It was my sin that held Him there Until it was accomplished;
His dying breath has brought me life – I know that it is finished.”

And because we live open lives of rebellion against God, our children watch and learn and follow in our footsteps – our sin always has consequences for others. So, you see, the crowd in Jerusalem are merely representative of the crowd of humanity in general swept along by our desire for human built power,

glory and freedom – because a crucified God, frankly looks pathetic to the human eye.

But that's not how the story ends is it? Fifty days after they have sent Jesus to the cross, as Peter, full of the Holy Spirit preaches in the street on the day of Pentecost, the crowd suddenly realise what they have done. In Acts 2:36-37 Peter declares, "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ. When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, Brothers, what shall we do?"

All of us who have carelessly gone along with the crowd, dismissing Jesus and living lives which caused him to be crucified need to come to that startling realisation that he died for our sins, 1 Peter 2:24 is quite clear, "[Jesus] himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed." I cannot blame the crowd - it was my sin which held him there!

That should cut us to the heart too. Martin Luther said, "The whole value of the meditation of the suffering of Christ lies in this, that man should come to the knowledge of himself and sink and tremble." And as we do that, it should cause us to ask, "What shall we do?"

Well, my friends, the wonderful news of the Gospel is that it is done! But what does Peter say to the crowd in Acts 2? "Peter replied, Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off— for all whom the Lord our God will call."

Isn't that wonderful? As a crowd we have rejected Jesus.

As a crowd we might hear the amazing truth of his resurrection, but then as individuals we need to act to receive what Christ has done for us, we need to turn away from self focus and head instead towards God – that’s repentance. And then we need to make a public profession of that and of our faith in who Jesus is and how he has rescued us – that’s baptism. Everything else is done by Jesus.

If we will do those two things then we will receive forgiveness for our sins through Jesus and God’s promised gift of the Holy Spirit to help us live our lives for him and it will impact those around us including our families.

In his little book “The Case for Easter” Lee Strobel says in his conclusion, “...a few months after I became a follower of Jesus, our five year old daughter, Alison – who had previously only known a father who had been profane, angry, verbally harsh, drunken, and all too often absent – walked up to my wife and said, ‘Mummy, I want God to do for me what he’s done for Dad.’...Even at that early age, she experienced an authentic spiritual transformation that shines through her life to this day.”

So, do we just go with the flow, or will we swim against the tide, recognising that Jesus died for our personal sins and rose again to eternal life to conquer their penalty – death. Will we simply behave as part of a herd or will we be cut to the heart, and repent and be baptised because the God of justice and mercy calls all who are far off, we just need to hear him above the sound of the crowd.