

“Join the Crowd”

I

Palm Sunday: Possibly the greatest public relations disaster in the history of the human race. But the fault does not lie with Jesus. It’s the company he keeps.

For a first century rabbi, Jesus exhibits a remarkably modern genius for branding and strategic self-promotion. Apple could not roll out a new I-Phone as effectively as Jesus introduces himself to Jerusalem. Matthew’s entire Gospel has been leading up to this moment, when Jesus will finally enter the holy city. Jesus wants to make the most of this occasion—make sure his message comes through loud and clear—so he decides to enter at the beginning of Passover week, where he has a very good chance of drawing a very good crowd. Passover is a huge holiday, and every year Jerusalem is jam-packed with pilgrims and tourists and spiritual sightseers from every corner of the Roman Empire -wandering around with their fanny packs and subway maps, buying food from street vendors (licensed or not), and generally causing congestion and commotion. So Jesus will enter Jerusalem at a time and in a manner that is all but certain to attract an enormous, enthusiastic crowd.

In retrospect, that was probably a mistake.

The entire entrance is carefully staged, elaborately choreographed, down to the smallest detail. The script comes from the prophet Zechariah, who predicted that one day Jerusalem’s king would come to her in peace and meekness and humility, riding on a donkey. It is a potent and powerful image –a donkey instead of a warhorse, an implement of agriculture instead of an engine of war, a tractor instead of a tank. It is Jesus’ way of telling everyone the kind of king he intends to be. So he sends a couple of his disciples to find him a donkey—two donkeys, actually, for reasons we cannot get into this morning¹—and he starts out at the Mount of Olives, a setting fraught with meaning in the prophetic lexicon of Israel. He climbs on the donkeys and rides into town. It is a picture-perfect reenactment of Zechariah’s prophecy, a clear and compelling claim that the peaceable king has come.

Or it would be, if it weren’t for all the people getting in the way. The big entrance does, in fact, draw a big crowd, but the crowd is not content merely to observe the parade; they want to join in. So they get up out of their lawn chairs, dash into the street and throw themselves into the spectacle. They take off their coats, and spread them across the road. They cut branches from the trees and spread those across the road. They surround Jesus, before and behind, shouting, “*Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD! Hosanna in the highest heaven!*”

This is a disaster, as the last two verse make clear. Jesus meant to make a statement, but when he finally enters the city, it is the crowd who speaks for him...and the crowd gets it wrong. They say, “*This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.*” Close, but no cigar. Jesus is no mere prophet. Jerusalem’s king came to her on this day, but his message got drowned out in the shouts of the crowd.²

II

And of course, it is all downhill from here. As we preachers are contractually obligated to point out in our Palm Sunday sermons, the crowd that cheers for Jesus today will turn on Jesus tomorrow, or soon thereafter. They are not just confused and clueless; they are also fickle and flaky and easily led. Today they shout hosanna and call him a prophet; come Friday, they will call him a criminal and cry out for his blood.

But isn't that always the problem with Jesus? The crowd? I mean, I like Jesus. I like Jesus quite a bit. I do, however, have a problem with some of his friends –the weird kids in my high school who wanted to know if I was “ready” for the “rapture,” the religious right types, who think Jesus died to secure them a seat in Congress, the money grubbing prosperity preachers with their blow-dried hair and private jets, the medievalists who keep trying to force our public schools to teach “intelligent design.” I have a problem with those people. They are on my list.

You probably have your own list, your own problem people –friends of Jesus who rub you the wrong way. Some of your people may be here this morning. Maybe I'm one of them, I don't know. But we all have a list –people who get in our way, people who surround Jesus and muddy his message; people who seem to stand between us and him.

I like Jesus. I like Jesus just fine. But I do have a problem with his crowd.

III

Which raises the question –does he? Does Jesus ever complain about this crowd surrounding him and shouting at him, blocking the view and messing up his message? Ever roll his eyes at their excess? Does Jesus ever once grumble to one of the disciples about these tacky and tasteless masses?

Well...actually...no. Jesus never says anything of the sort. And in Matthew's Gospel, especially, you get the sense that Jesus is just fine with the unruly horde before and behind him. Compared to Mark's account of the very same story, Matthew seems to go out of his way to make mention of the crowd –we hear about them three times in these eleven verses.³ It is almost as if Matthew thinks they are supposed to be here –that the crowd is part of the message, not a distraction from it; a feature, not a bug. Matthew suggests that the crowd is right where Jesus wants them.

But why? Who is this crowd anyway? Who are these people thronged around Jesus? It's not the religious establishment, the scribes and the Pharisees and preachers in their long flowing gowns. And it's certainly not Herod or Pilate or anyone in a position of power. No, we have every reason to believe that the crowd consists of the kind of people who always surround Jesus, the kind of people that Jesus likes best: the poor, the outcast, the so-called “sinners.” The people that Jesus came looking for. The people that Jesus always intended to include and gather to himself.

You see, the crowd is another clue about this king, another indication of his plans and priorities.⁴ He comes in peace, and he comes surrounded by those who are least in this world –escorted by a pack of nobodies, serenaded by the shouts of losers. Of course they are right there with him. The crowd is the point. And Jesus would not have it any other way.⁵

IV

Palm Sunday practically rubs our noses in an awkward fact: Jesus and the crowd are a package deal. We can't have one without the other. We can't get to him without going through them. We can not be followers of Jesus while refusing to be part of his crowd.

That means we have some good news and some bad news this morning. The bad news is this: When it comes to Jesus, we have to share. As a friend of mine used to say, Jesus is *not* your boyfriend. Jesus does not do exclusive relationships. You can have a *personal* relationship with Jesus, but you can not have a *private* one. Belong to him, belong to his crowd. And that means we will have to learn to share –not just with the people we like, not just with the people who agree with our theology and subscribe to our politics and operate within the confines of whatever we consider a rational understanding of the world. We have to share Jesus with the *entire* crowd. We have to stand, side-by-side and should-to-shoulder with every last person who wants to be there –no matter how strange or stupid some of them may seem, no matter what hanging out with them might do to our reputation. And we have to work for their well-being as well as our own. We have to see to their needs and do right by them. Jesus even tells us that our love for God will be seen in our love for God's people –*all* of God's people.⁶ The bad news is that Jesus and the crowd are a package deal, and so we must learn to share.

But the good news is this: We get to share. We get to be part of this crowd. And that frees us in ways we can hardly imagine. As disciples of Jesus, we're not forced to limp along with our narrow little understandings of God and God's purpose. We're not left to rely on our own limited resources. And we are never alone. We have sisters and brothers in every time zone, every tax bracket, on every corner of the earth and in every year of human history. We can lean on the wisdom of our mothers and fathers in the faith; we can be sustained by the hope of generations yet to come. We can travel halfway around world and find that we will be welcomed as family.

When we join up with Jesus, we get to be part of something so much bigger than ourselves. We discover the grace of sharing, the blessing of belonging to this crowd.

V

Palm Sunday begins the highest and the holiest week on the Christian calendar. As we stand on the brink of these literally awe-some days, this Palm Sunday service of worship is an invitation to each one of us: Go ahead, join the crowd. Wade right into the throng that greeted Jesus with joy, that shouted loud hosannas and waved those palms of victory. But realize what you are getting yourself into. Recognize that there will be a place reserved for you on Thursday, among a much smaller crowd: the circle of friends who shared his last supper, who were confused and perplexed and afraid. Come take your place with the one who denied him, the one who betrayed him, the ones who forsook him and fled. Stay on through Friday, to stand with the circle of women who watched and wept as they hung him from the cross. Stick around for Saturday, and come sit for awhile in the heavy, empty silence on the day that Jesus has gone down to the dead. And know that there will be a place for you here next Sunday, when we find out what the future holds...for Jesus, and for the rest of us as well.

All I'm saying is: this week, of all weeks, join the crowd. For God's sake, and for your own.

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Notes

¹ Matthew, more than any other Gospel writer, emphasizes Jesus' life as the fulfillment of Scripture. And in his account of Palm Sunday, Matthew takes the idea of fulfillment literally—a little too literally, perhaps. The passage in Zechariah 9.9 uses the common Hebrew poetic device of parallelism, that is, repeating a concept or an image for emphasis: “*humble, and mounted on a donkey/and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*” But Matthew must have missed the day they taught Hebrew poetry in school, because he mistakes Zechariah's parallelism for a baldly literal claim that Jesus must ride on *two* donkeys—and then he modifies Mark's account of the Triumphal Entry to make it so. Certainly it underscores Matthew's relentless commitment to telling the story of Jesus as a fulfillment of what God has already promised; it also serves to remind us that whatever the Gospels may be, they are not disinterested historical accounts. See Dennis C Duling's discussion in the notes for the *Harper Collins Study Bible*. (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1993), p.1895.

² I am intrigued—although not entirely convinced—by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan's claim that Jesus was explicitly organizing a counter-demonstration to the Imperial procession on the other side of town. I think the historical record is ambiguous at best, but the idea will certainly preach.

³Eugene Boring first drew my attention to the prominence of the crowd vis-à-vis Mark's account. *New Interpreter's Bible, Volume VIII*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995), pp.402-404.

⁴ Calvin sees the crowd, no less than the donkey, as “a solemn performance” of the nature of Christ's kingdom. *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Volume II*. Translated by the Rev. William Pringle. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998), pp.445-456.

⁵ This is less a reference and more the inclusion of something that would have otherwise ended up on the cutting room floor. In its discussion of *ochlos*—the Greek word for crowd—Kittel quotes a beautiful rabbinic saying: “He who sees a crowd of people, let him say: Blessed be the wise one of mysteries, for their faces are not alike and their knowledge is not alike.” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), p.585.

⁶ “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” –John 13.35.