

Sermon 18th July 2021

I wonder what it would be like being constantly recognised wherever you went. This, it seems, is what happened to Jesus.

The only very small experience I have of that is shopping in Sainsbury's! It always happens: someone always recognises me, often a child tugging on its parents' arm saying 'mum that's the Vicar' and unless I'm wearing my collar the parent usually then looks at me with some kind of questioning expression as if to say 'really? Are you sure?'. I may or may not then get a friendly smile! If I'm wearing my collar, older people usually smile and say hello; of course they are far more likely to know me than me them. The Till is more usually than not the place where things happen! Often mercifully avoided by me these days by the fantastic scanning system, if I do need to use a Till there's nearly always a comment, or a question, or if there's no queue behind me - a fuller conversation. I sometime wonder what would happen if I offered a Blessing, or a Prayer, but more often than not an 'I hope the rest of your day goes ok' and lots of 'thank yous' seems to leave Till Assistants hopefully slightly more cheerful than they might otherwise have been with their long hours. So that's just a bit about my take on being 'recognised' by strangers.

And so to our Gospel story for today: Jesus for the most part in the Gospel narratives seems not just to be recognised but also pursued by people and has problems getting away from them to give himself and his disciples some peace. The extract we've just heard actually separates out two separate incidences, and had the lectionary given us the whole episode we'd have had the feeding of the 5000 in the middle. The miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes is not where our focus is meant to be today though, and so instead we have the themes which are associated with crowd behaviours, recognition, sheep and their shepherd, rest and quiet, compassion, sickness and healing. In fact when we looked at this passage last Tuesday as we always look at our Gospel in our Team meeting, we recognised that in this short two-part passage we have an extraordinary amount of information about the Christian faith and about Jesus' ministry, his behaviour and his actions.

Let's dig a little deeper into one of those themes I just mentioned - crowd behaviour.

Many people saw Jesus with his disciples, and recognising him they went after him. I wonder, did everyone in those crowds actually make that recognition? Or did they just follow, like sheep? I think this has been used as a sociology experiment, but if you stand on a corner of a street and look up, others passers-by will start looking up too. Some might even stop. Some might ask 'what are looking at'. There's nothing to see of course, but still people tend to behave the same as those around them. Did they all recognise Jesus, or just follow the crowd?

I've sometimes wondered what it would be like if there were no other Christians around, in my community, or no Christian church, no one to pray with or worship with. No crowd to follow at all, just me and my faith. What would I do? Would I continue on in my faith, alone? Yes, is the answer I'd hope for. But crowds are highly influential, even though they're usually unaware of that. We follow, like sheep, and so often fall in with what everyone else is doing. How individual are our choices and decisions in our faith? Might we follow Jesus if we were the only person to do so? The really positive side of just following everyone else in today's gospel story is of course that many people got to hear Jesus - teaching them, witnessing healings. But crowds can behave quite badly (*not of course thinking of any particular recent crowds we've seen on our TV's!*) and Jesus knows when to try and get away from them, how to show them compassion and if we read around this episode he also knows when to direct them to sit down, and when to tell them to go away and dismiss them too! Otherwise, crowds can get unruly, like sheep without a shepherd and get themselves into all sorts of danger.

I wonder what our behaviour is like in a crowd? Do we always want to do what everyone else is doing? Do we want to fit in and try not draw any attention to ourselves may be even with a small thing such as standing up or sitting down in the 'wrong' place? Does it matter? Do we always need uniformity and always need to do the same as each other and I'm thinking now about not just our behaviour in the world out there - but also about what we do in our Churches.

What would Jesus say to us here, today, about what matters and what doesn't? He clearly had some views about orderliness, and certainly crowd control, but he also seemed to embrace those who stepped out of line or behaved very differently. I think these issues are food for thought in our church life as well as in the wider world.

What kind of a church do we want to be? One where everyone just fits in, or are we content with embracing someone who might behave differently or unusually? I'm sure that we all have deep respect for someone whose way of following Jesus isn't the same as ours, and compassion if they're struggling in their faith, but the point is this – what would Jesus say to us about the things which matter?

We know that some of the words we use today in our Eucharistic Liturgy are the same – or exceedingly similar – to those which Jesus spoke at the Last Supper. For our evidence, we can turn to Joachim Jeremiah's 'The Eucharistic Words of Jesus', or Hippolytus' writing in the 4th century when the Eucharistic Liturgy was revisited. If you've not read any of these things – please take a look. I find them mind blowing.

The important thing then is this: we should do Liturgy, Eucharistic Liturgy: 'it is meet and right so to do' / 'it is our duty and our joy' etc. We do this for all of our earthly

life because that is what Jesus said we should do. But....what else is essential to our practices in our church services? What else is important? Several things (eg singing of Psalms as after Last Supper). What would Jesus say today about how we are as a crowd on a Sunday? At present we have a lot of restrictions and we hope in time that these will be lifted. But if we think back before Covid began, I would argue that we were constrained by our human natures. None of us wants to be different, or 'step out of line', but do we just do what the crowd is doing and keep the status quo and behave exactly the same as the person next to us?!

Last week I ran an ESP session on Brueghel's Sermon on the Mount. If you're not familiar with this picture, it's a good study in crowd behaviour in the context of what was arguably the most impactful sermon ever – on humanity and on other world religions. But the crowd is fairly chaotic. Take a look at the foreground of the picture and see what's going on!

What, then, would Jesus say to us today about our Church services? I'm not advocating a revolution! But I'm just questioning what are the essentials and what matters most. Amen.