



THE CROWD'S REACTION TO JESUS
Psalm 1; Mark 11:1-10; Luke 4: 16-22; 29-30

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During most of his ministry Jesus was surrounded by crowds. Crowds reached out to touch him that they might be healed. Crowds hung on his words hoping to understand something more about God. Crowds were amazed at his miracles. Their voices cried out to him for help. Crowds gathered around Christ, followed him, listened to him, and hoped that somehow this one who amazed them so much might be the Messiah. In the last week of Christ's life, crowds played a very prominent part. Let's look at their reaction to Christ.

The Crowds Were Inspired by Jesus

During the Passover Feast in Jerusalem, the people from all over Israel came to celebrate this national feast. The Jewish historian, Josephus, estimated that almost three million people crowded the city during this time.

As Jesus entered Jerusalem, the crowds were inspired by him. He came into Jerusalem riding upon a donkey. Crowds threw down palm branches and their outer garments in his pathway. They shouted, "Hosanna to the one who comes in the name of the Lord." Through this prophetic picture or dramatic parable, Jesus attempted to teach the crowd a lesson about who he was. In ancient times a king, when he was going to war, would ride into battle on a horse.

When a king rode upon a donkey, it was a symbol of peace. In the day of Christ a donkey was not looked upon as a contemptible or amusing animal. It was symbolic of peace. "He that cometh" was a phrase depicting the Messiah. Jesus drew upon the ancient picture from Zechariah and other prophets which depicted the coming of the Messiah upon a lowly beast (Zechariah 9:9). At his coming the crowd shouted: "Hosanna." Too often we think that their hosanna meant praise to Jesus. But literally the word, "hosanna" meant "save now." "Save us now," they cried. "Here comes the king, the Messiah. Save us now." The crowds were inspired by his presence and hoped that he might be the Messiah. But not all of this admiration turned to adoration. Later it would change to something else.

Incited by Jesus

Sometimes the crowds were incited by Jesus. In just a few short days, after the cleansing of the Temple and the arrest of Jesus, the crowds, who had been inspired to shout, "Save us now," began to scream, "Crucify him, crucify him." How quickly their attitude changed and they turned away from him. If you read the Scripture carefully, you will note that Jesus had received negative reactions from crowds before. Do you remember the response to the first sermon which Jesus preached in his hometown? They had expected a positive word from their hometown boy who had become famous. But his sermon shocked them, and they sought to stone him to death as they drove him out of the synagogue. The crowds in his own hometown turned against him.

On another occasion when Jesus had cast out the demons in the demoniac in the country of the Gerasenes, crowds tried to drive Jesus out of their country because they were afraid of him. After one of his miracles, the crowds wanted to make Jesus a king. The crowd had not always responded positively to Christ all along. Here the crowds are incited, "stirred up" according to the Scriptures by the chief priests.

Among the crowd were the followers of Barabbas. Can you imagine their reaction when they heard that there could possibly be a choice between Jesus and Barabbas? At this word all of the Barabbas supporters—the nationalists, who wanted to see the overthrow of the Roman government—packed into the courtyard. "Which one will you choose?" You can hear the crowd already shouting: "Give us Barabbas." I suspect that most of the people in this crowd were not the same people who were along the roadway shouting "Save us now," as Jesus rode by. This crowd thought that the end which they wanted to accomplish would come about by force—not law. Their goal would be realized by violence, not by love, through war—not peace. "Give us Barabbas," they cried. He symbolized for them the overthrow of the Roman government and the establishment again of the Jewish nation as a mighty military and political power. "Jesus doesn't represent that at all," they yelled "Away with him." The popularity of Jesus was also beginning to wane, even with the common people, because they began to see that he was not the kind of Messiah that they had hoped for. His message gave another emphasis. He was different.

It is often easy, isn't it, for someone to incite the crowd and turn them in a certain direction? All you have to do is view films about Adolph Hitler to see how he was able to incite crowds in one of the most intelligent nations of the world and quickly turn those people away from justice, goodness, and the Christian perspective of life to a totally different way. He was able to enforce a law which required that the cross be removed in Christian churches and replaced by a swastika. Most of the churches obeyed this injunction. "There is no god," Hitler declared, "but Germany."

Crowds can be incited to do evil. Do you remember some of the awful things crowds did during the racial turmoil in this country? You could see the anger in faces of persons filled with prejudice as black children and black adults were beaten, stoned, and driven out of towns. Remember the snarling German shepherd dogs and the fire hoses that were used against blacks in Alabama several years ago when they were demonstrating against unjust laws? Study the faces of persons you see in a mob on television. Jim Jones incited a crowd and drew disciples around him. Later he convinced them to drink Kool-Aid which had been poisoned as a way of committing suicide. Powerful leaders can incite crowds, but they do not always achieve good ends. Isn't it strange that a person will often do something as a part of the crowd, the bunch, the gang, that he or she would never do alone? Sometimes individuals lose their sense of personal responsibility in a crowd. It disappears and a mob mentality takes over. Sometimes the crowd was stirred up against Jesus. They were incited by his presence.

Responded Out of Ignorance

At other times, the crowd responded to Jesus out of ignorance. We sometimes sing the Negro spiritual, "Sweet little Jesus boy, we didn't know who you was." "Jesus," the crowd yelled, "if we had known you were the Messiah, we would have come running. Do you think we would have ever crucified him if we had really known he was the Messiah?" Of course not! Jesus looked at Jerusalem and wept, saying: "Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" (Luke 13:34). Then from the cross he cried, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." "For had they known it," Paul wrote, "they would not have crucified the Lord of glory."

How often, out of the ignorance, people do not respond to Christ, or turn against his way, or, hurt his Kingdom, or reject his cause. They would not do it deliberately. It is done out of ignorance. They do not know better. It is sad. Out of ignorance many turned away from Christ. Jesus was first deserted by his hometown. Soon he is deserted by his friends; then his relatives turn against him, then the crowd, and finally his eleven disciples flee. They really didn't know who he was. If they had known for certain he was the Messiah, of course, they would have responded to him in a much more positive way. It is tragic, isn't it, that ignorance sometimes feeds on prejudice, propaganda, gossip, half-truths, envy, and jealousy? The force of evil moves through the world carried forward by the stream of ignorance which touches too many shores of life. Too often we walk through life in ignorance not knowing what to do or how we should respond to many situations.

Ernest Campbell, the former minister at Riverside Church in New York City, tells a delightful story about a man who became very aggravated with his wife's

affection for her cat. My telling this story does not mean I dislike cats. After all, we had a cat that lived for eighteen years. Back to the story...Every time the man came home his wife's cat was in his favorite chair. The cat would rub against him and leave cat hairs on his clothes. Everywhere he looked there was some reminder for him of that cat. His wife devoted every waking minute of her affection to that cat. Finally, he had come to the end of his rope. He put the cat in a sack with some rocks in it and pitched him in the river. When he came home from work that afternoon, he found his wife grief stricken. "I don't know what has happened to my cat," she cried. "I simply cannot find him." "Honey," her husband said. "I'll tell you what I will do. I will go to the office and put a notice on the bulletin board, and I'll advertise in the paper that I will pay a five hundred dollar reward for anybody who can find your cat." "Oh that's wonderful," she said. As he was putting that note on the bulletin board at work, one of the men commented: "Five hundred dollars! That's an awful lot of money for a cat." "But when you know what you know," the husband observed, "you can afford to take chances."

You and I are supposed to know something. We are supposed to have a unique perspective on what God has done in the world. God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, and the way of ignorance is no longer our way. We have seen what God is like in Christ. "I am the way, truth and the life," he declared. "No one comes to the Father but by Me." In Christ we have found a new and different way. Let our response not be out of ignorance but from the insight and wisdom of a higher way.

Intolerant to Jesus

But the crowd sometimes reacted to Jesus with intolerance. The chief priest stirred up the crowd because the Scribes and Pharisees were frightened by his teachings. They already had their understanding of the law of God. They didn't want this person stirring up the crowd. They saw him as a radical. He was public enemy number one to them. Jesus was a disturber of the status quo. They had become intolerant and wouldn't allow any changes in their traditions. They had become bigots. Bigot is a derivative of the word, "by God." "By God," they thought. "They had all of the correct insights about God." They had God behind their own fences. They understood his law. He had spoken, they had it written down, and they were the chief interpreters of his way and will. They understood his message. They told others how they were supposed to respond to it. In their mind Jesus was stirring up the crowd. "It has been said to you." Jesus declared, "But now I say unto you." "He is breaking the Sabbath laws, breaking our traditions, and breaking our laws," they asserted. "Who does he think he is?" They understood God. They were the chief interpreters of him to the world. Jesus was a heretic to them.

Doesn't it sound familiar? Within our own denomination there have been voices that cried. "God has spoken in the inerrant Bible. We, our group, are the only persons who can interpret God correctly. Look to us for infallible guidance." This group states that the pastor is the one who is supposed to tell lay persons what to believe and how to understand the Bible. The inerrantists claim that they alone have the correct understanding about God and God's way. Here is intolerance and bigotry at its worst. This kind of attitude reaches back to the first century. It's that kind of leadership which stirred up the crowd which crucified Jesus. The chief priests stirred up the crowd and incited them for their own ends and purpose. Persons who hold to this perspective are not willing to be open to God, to let him come into their life and teach them new truths or new insight, or lead them into new paths for ministry. Remember every Christian is a priest before God. No one has a special handle on truth about God. God continuously works to guide us into deeper truth. When the crowd is intolerant, it is far from God.

The Indifference of the Crowd

I guess, however, most of the time the crowd is just indifferent. The crowd was made up of good folks. They were ordinary people like you and me. They were kind, loveable, but busy. They were engaged in other activities. They had come to Jerusalem to see the sights. They were on tours. They had come to visit relatives and friends. They had come to see the Temple. They had come to see all the sights of the big city of Jerusalem. They were just busy with other things. Other things had crowded out their concern for Jesus. They were indifferent.

Often the crowd is indifferent. We see evil, suffering, pain, and sin. We see needs, but too often we are indifferent to them. As someone has said, "This is the age of the shrug." Thirty-eight people stood by and watched a man drown at one of our seacoast towns. Thirty-eight people! When one started to move forward to save him, someone stopped him, "Don't get involved," they said. A crowd in a New Jersey city stood by and watched a woman beaten to death, and nobody moved to do anything. "Don't get involved." This is the age of the shrug. Stand back. Be by-standers. Don't dirty your hands with somebody else's business.

Dick Gregory, the one time noted comedian, told about an experience he had as a young teenager. He sold newspapers and shined shoes, and things had gone pretty well that day. He went into a cafe and got himself a good lunch. He ate a bowl of chili, a cheeseburger, a coke, and a big slice of chocolate cake. While he was eating his meal, an old wino came in and asked for twenty-six cents worth of food. After he finished the meal, the owner asked him for his twenty-six cents; the wino said: "I don't have any money." The owner took a bottle and knocked him down on the floor and began to beat him. Dick Gregory said that he jumped up and said. "Leave him

alone. I'll pay the twenty-six cents." The wino looked up at him and said. "Keep your twenty-six cents. You don't have to pay, not now. I just finished paying for it." The wino got up, walked toward the door, stopped, and put his hand on Gregory's shoulder and said: "Thanks, sonny, but it's too late now. Why didn't you pay it before?"

A lot of us in life respond too late. We are indifferent to the needs around us. Read the New Testament and hear the screaming cry of condemnation which Jesus Christ directed against apathy and indifference. He condemned the man who had only one talent and buried it in the ground. His condemnation was because he did nothing. The women in the parable of the foolish virgins who had no oil are condemned because they did nothing. In the parable of Dives and Lazarus where the rich man eats his fill and the beggar, sitting at the foot of his table, gets nothing from him but the scraps off his table, the rich man is condemned to Hades because he did nothing. The Church at Laodicea is described by John as a church God will "spew out of his mouth," because it is neither hot nor cold. It did nothing. Jesus said that on the day of the last judgment some people will ask why they are condemned to outer darkness. "Lord, when did we not serve you?" "When you did not do it unto the least of these my children," he responds. When they did nothing to assist those in need, they rejected their Lord. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the greatest condemnation is directed against the priest and Levi. They passed by on the other side and did nothing. The crowd is often indifferent to the problems and needs of the world. Too often we ignore the problems of prejudice, war, child abuse, and other massive evils that exist in the world. We often walk by on the other side and do nothing.

In Bach's magnificent piece of music, St. Matthews Passion, the choir raises the question at the Lord's Supper which all the disciples ask: "Lord, is it I?" The chorus responds in a ringing cry: "It is I! It is I!" We as his disciples are guilty. You and I are the indifferent crowd when we walk through the problems of life without hearing or seeing them. The needs of humanity cry out for us to do something and, instead of responding to those needs, we remain disconnected, disinterested, uninvolved, and apathetic. The voice of Christ is raised in judgment against us, because we have done nothing when he has called us to do something.

The Crowd Trusted Jesus

But you know what the crowd can do? There is always the possibility that the crowd can entrust. We can commit our lives to Christ and follow him. We can see in this One the way that gives us real life, hope, and redemption. We commit our lives to him by a leap of faith. All of life involves some kind of choice. You will choose. I will choose. We can choose to go the way of ignorance and indifference, or we can choose to commit our lives to Jesus Christ and follow his way to be a part of the

redemptive force which is striving to change society into the pattern of Christ. We can entrust our lives to him.

Everybody has some kind of god in life. For some, their god has become alcoholism. For others, it has become drugs, wealth, power, security, prestige, control, fame or something else. Turn away from that false god and let Christ be Lord of your life. Open your life to him so that everything you do in life—your play, your job, your home life—everything is guided by the spirit and power of Christ. Entrust your life to him.

The cross of Christ lifts up its ugly head in society to remind us of the way of God. We all choose which way we will go. Many years ago Isaac Watts wrote a very moving hymn which calls us to commitment.

When I survey the wondrous cross,
on which the Prince of glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss,
and pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
save in the death of Christ, my God;
all the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.

See, from His head, His hands, His feet,
sorrow and love flow mingled down;
did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were a present far too small;
love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all.

Loving God, grant that as a part of the crowd we shall not condemn you, reject you, nor be indifferent. We respond to such amazing love and commit our lives in trust. Through Christ, we pray. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, we come this day to praise You as we reflect upon the entrance of Christ to Jerusalem, the reaction of crowds to him and as we look upon the cross of Christ. We have sensed Your grace through the world around us, in the hush of snowfall in the past, in the power of a driving rain, in the splendor of a starlit night, in the warmth of the sun on a cold day, in the beauty of spring and in the continuous cycle of the seasons.

Nevertheless, O God, we confess that there are times when Your voice seems so silent to us. In the face of pain, suffering, rejection, tragedy, defeat, evil, war and death, we long to hear Your words of support and encouragement. Sometimes Your Spirit seems far from us. We do not feel the warmth of Your presence, but instead we often feel that Your back is turned away from us. Show us through the suffering of Your Son on the cross the depth of Your concern, Your love and Your abiding Presence.

We await Your Presence now in this hour. We open our hearts to sense Your coming. Surprise us with Your Presence. May we be assured of Your love, sustained by Your power and strengthened by Your grace. Touch us now by Your loving Presence, as we pray it in the name of Jesus Christ, our living Lord. Amen.