

Philippians 3:4b-14

Psalm 80

Matthew 21:33-46

Crowd-ed

In a sentence:

Whether seemingly on our side or not, God in Christ is always for us

“They wanted to arrest Jesus, but they feared the crowds, because [the people] regarded him as a prophet.”

The ambiguity of the crowd

Crowds are ambiguous things. Crowds are “averages”, for better or worse. Governments need to know what is the average need of people in a crowd in order to deliver one-size-fits-most social services. Schools need to know the average needs and abilities of students to deliver one-size-fits-some education. Event organisers need to know how many toilet cubicles to order for the average crowd at an average concert weekend. Crowds tend to be predictable.

Crowds can also be pretty stupid. The mob cannot think, so people can be crushed by crowds – one way or another, literally or metaphorically, intentionally or not. The current critique of political populism is as much a critique of the stupidity of crowd as it is of the cynical manipulation of the masses by influential individuals. Crowds tend to operate close to the lowest common denominator and, as such, can be very hard to move when that thing in common is challenged. Democracy, of course, is a politics of the crowd, with elections and referendums being about what is most common to most in the masses.

In and of the crowd

Yet, for all of the ways that crowds reduce us, in truth we need crowds as much as we need to be done with them. The trick to crowds is being “in” the crowd but not “of” the crowd. Indeed, this is the trick to life, for life is crowd-ed.

In our text today, the Pharisees and the priests are in the crowd, and “of” the crowd. This doesn’t mean they agree with the crowd but that the crowd prevails. Challenged by Jesus, they are forced – they think – to acquiesce, and they slink away to attack again at some later time. They are only able to act *with* the crowd. Later in the story, another crowd comes into play, with which the religious leaders are again in accord, but now it is “their” crowd. Now, still “in” and “of” the crowd, they are what the crowd allows and they get what they want.

Jesus, on the other hand, is in but *not* of the crowd. Certainly, this crowd saves him some grief from the religious leaders, but another crowd will gather to accuse and decry against him. The crowd is Jesus’ context, but not his measure. Jesus is in the crowd, but not of it – not *contained* by it. Crowds change, but Jesus does not. For the religious leaders, however, the crowd *is* their measure, is their containment (or freedom). The Pharisee and the priest caricatured in these conflicts with Jesus change with the crowd.

Note what this means: the Pharisee and the priest can only be themselves in one kind of crowd: the crowd they agree with. The Pharisee, then, changes with the changing context, becoming larger or smaller, freer or more constrained. Fear might cause us to make ourselves safer but it also makes us smaller.

For Jesus, all the world is open to him, good and bad. He is always in crowds but never of them, never *by* them. Of course, some crowds are safer and more comfortable. But there is no part of the world which is not *his* world, given to him, open to him, in which he is not at home.

The difference between Jesus and the Pharisee – the difference, that is, between Jesus and most of us – is that the Pharisee changes as the crowd changes but Jesus does not. The Pharisee is often in the wrong place, in the wrong crowd – as in our reading today. Jesus is never in the wrong crowd, because the crowd is not his measure. His measure is the unity of God and the oneness of the world. God does not wax or wane with location, so that the many locations in the world do not divide the world in any real way. The one God relates to one world, and so Jesus does not change.

And this opens up something else – in fact, the crucial thing. The Pharisee is sometimes for the crowd, and sometimes against – depending on the crowd – changing the Pharisees own purpose. Jesus’ doesn’t change with the change of mood which might sweep across the masses. His stance, his relationship to the crowd, remains unchanged.

In and for the crowd

And what is that stance? Jesus is in the crowd but not of the crowd *for* the sake of the crowd. I called this the crucial thing – the crux, the cross-thing – because it is in front of the crowd at Golgotha and the crowd of all human history that Jesus hangs “for” those who put him there. Jesus is *always* for the crowd, always for those around him, whether he affirms them or opposes them. It is on the cross that Jesus is definitively one for all, surrounded by those who oppose him and those who hoped he was their hope.

This is the basis of Christian talk of justification by grace. God values our good work but loved us before we did anything. God hates our sin but loves us nonetheless. This doesn’t make the good we do (or don’t do) without value. It calls us to re-value our good. Goodness is not only for the crowd in which we feel comfortable. Our goodness should not change with whether we are among friends or foes, whether it is light or dark. For, as with God, so also for us: we are what we do to those who oppose us, we are what we do in the dark.

In the light of day and the darkest night, in solitude and in the throng, in safe places and fearful one, God is for us, in order that we might be in God and for those who love or oppose us. There is no place that God is not, in order that every place can be a place of rich human possibility. There is no place that God is not, in order that love might always be possible.

Let us, then, wherever we find ourselves, commit to the work of love which brings order out of chaos and life out of death.
