

THE CROWD

Scripture Readings: Matthew 21:1-11; Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew 27:11-54

Texts: Matthew 21:8-9; Matthew 27:20-25

The crowds in the gospel readings this morning are more powerful than we realize. They drive the action of the narrative and one wonders if the gospel writer is actually more focused on the crowds than he is on Jesus. The crowds act and express their feelings in singular unity that is revealing and frightening. Even though the crowd acts, it is not always clear that the crowd even knows what drives them.

This lack of self-awareness could explain why the crowd goes from greeting Jesus with songs of hosanna on one day and then turns to cries for crucifixion a few days later. What led to this transition? I can say that commentators have spilled more words and ink trying to discern the reasons behind this transition than seems possible. I think ultimately, though, that the gospel writer uses the crowd as a mirror on our human condition.

For the gospel writer, the words “a very large crowd” becomes a code for those who drive the action of Palm Sunday and the Passion of Jesus. A very large crowd appears at the gates of Jerusalem to greet Jesus with cloaks and branches, and the words of a Psalm written for the entry of a king. A crowd appears with Judas to arrest Jesus. A crowd pushes Pilate towards the crucifixion of Jesus. Finally, crowds taunt Jesus in various ways at the cross—even the two insurrectionists on the other crosses join in these taunts.

Girardian thinkers—those who follow Rene Girard’s concept on anthropology and mimetic desire—have suggested that because human beings desire to imitate one another, power has been rooted in crowds since that foundation of the world. Even though leaders may attempt to corral crowds, the crowds ultimately drive the action either by embracing the ideas of the leader or joining in scapegoating others. Once the crowd embraces those things, they become a contagion sweeping up more people. The gospel writer sees that the crowd becomes a mirror where we see ourselves within.

For me, the idea of the mirror really connected when I remembered that Rembrandt painted himself into some of his paintings. In *The Raising of the Cross*, Rembrandt stares back at us from the shadows as the commander of those raising Jesus’ cross. Rembrandt even portrays himself in clothing of his time to demonstrate his

complicity in the crucifixion. In the etching, “The Three Crosses,” Rembrandt included himself in the crowd at the foot of the cross. He stares out of the etching toward us with a look of confusion on his face as though he wonders how he could be part of such an act. His look seems to be saying that his sin helped execute Jesus. Like the gospel writer, Rembrandt seems to invite us to see ourselves at the cross.

We do have hope; the contagion does not have to spread. The waters of baptism invite us into a new reality; a new vision. Instead of the fear and desire of the crowd for a scapegoat, through the waters of baptism we have been called to embrace the scapegoat with the love and grace we have been given. The waters of baptism call us from death to life. May they wash us always.

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